

WHEN I WAS A LOW-LIFE:

*An American Education*

Henry Edward Fool

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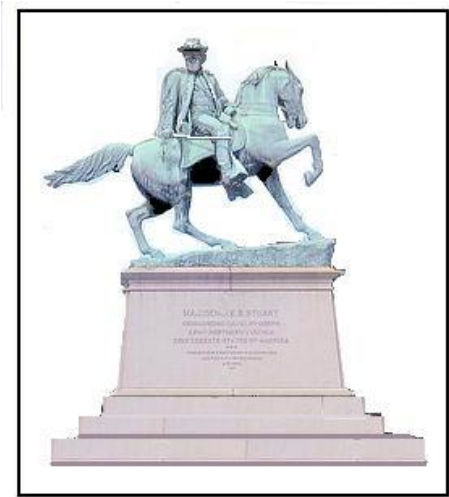
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## INTRODUCTION

This work is about the good people I bumped into while adrift on the river of Life as it flowed through Richmond, Virginia, from August 1967 until sometime in September 1971. While writing about this time I discovered (much to my surprise really) that, in many cases, the person involved reached out to me. Maybe that's just the way it happens with well-adjusted people; I'd only be guessing.

I've always been an excruciatingly shy person, preferring solitude to the painful, usually embarrassing and, more-often-than-not, awkward alternative. Because of that I have lived my life adrift. Naturally, I'm tempted to wrench that around a bit and try to pass it off as 'Faith', but I don't think anyone would fall for it. In this Life when I have had friends at all, it has typically been a single friend, one person at a time, who I felt accepted me for who I am. Beyond their acceptance, I feel pretty good about the fact that they all liked me as well. My father has been one of those friends throughout my entire life.

One evening before I left home for Richmond, he took me aside and told me this: "You're going to college and from now on you can do whatever you want to do, and I will not criticize you. But, if you ever *want* my advice or *need* my help, you only have to ask." My father, a good and honest man, and truly a man of his word, is, in my mind, what every man should be. I have fallen so far short of that. My fear is that I'm about to prove it. But I don't know what I can do about that now; I couldn't do anything about it then. If my math is correct, these events took place more than 40 years ago.



WELCOME TO RICHMOND

## CELIA

One rainy afternoon, near the end of September 1967, I found myself crouching behind a stone retaining wall at the corner of Harrison Street and West Franklin in Richmond, Virginia. I was a freshman in college—had been there about two months at the time. Through the drizzle I watched as a man, short and broad, in a very black, nicely made suit, carried cardboard boxes down a slippery brick pathway to the open trunk of a large old Rolls Royce. Behind him, following slowly, head down as if in mourning, was a college girl I recognized. He placed the boxes in the trunk, opened the back door for her (I expected to see a little bow, but there was none), closed the trunk as he went around, brushed his gloved hands together, slid in behind the wheel and drove off smartly. There was something very sad about this ceremony; maybe it was the rain, the girl's demeanor, the way the huge shiny car disappeared in silence down the street.

I stood up. I didn't know quite what it all meant, but, once I was sure they were truly gone, I emboldened myself to walk around the corner and up that same slippery brick pathway to the apartment door where it lead. I knocked. A girl I'd never seen before came to the door.

"Is Celia here?"

"Nope. Are you Edward?"

"Yeah..."

"This is for you." She handed me a tasteful envelope. I tore it open and took out the tasteful note within, and read these words: "I will never forget you. I will always love you. Celia"

“She’s gone?” I asked while folding the thing and shoving it into the back pocket of my jeans.

“Yeah,” sighed the girl, perfectly bored. “She’s rich, and now she’s gone.” She started to shut the door, but I put up a hand to prevent it.

“Is she coming back?” I had to ask. I had to know.

“I hope not.”

“What happened?”

“Her house burned down.” The girl sounded burdened but, at the same time, just a shade elated to convey the news. She put the back of one hand to her brow and tilted her head back and fluttered her eyelids like a heroine in a silent film. “Celia’s tragedy,” she said, “Tra-la-la-la-la.”

“Her house burned down?”

“Right to the ground. Her brother’s in the hospital,” she said leaning one hip against the edge of the door.

“Is he OK? I mean, I don’t know the guy but...”

She sighed. “I think he’s OK. It’s the house they’re upset over.”

“But, Celia—she’s not coming back?” I needed to hear it again.

“Well, she took all her stuff, what does that tell you?”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yeah, bummer, now they all have to fly off and live in their place in Europe somewhere until their humble mansion in Alexandria can be restored to its former glory.”

“Wow,” I said again.

“Yeah, wow.” She closed the door.

Celia was the personification of exotic beauty. She looked like the Hollywood image of Cleopatra. She had that beautiful thick silky black hair cropped flat just above her

shoulders; she had the noble nose; she had the posture, the bearing, the composure, the quiet self-assurance, the nails. She had heavily HEAVILY made-up eyes, which you know...well, I gotta admit.... Apparently, from what I'd been told, she may have had the money, although, to her credit, there had never been any blatant indicators. She had the cool, judgmental, cat-like demeanor of a siren. She was a stunner, there is no doubt about that. She was also the first girl to "fall in love" with me so hard and so deeply that she could not conceive of ever letting me go or ever letting anyone else enjoy the tremendous pleasure of my stammering company. How it had gotten to that I do not know.

It started off simply enough, she asked me if I wanted to come to her apartment and study history. I went; we studied; I left. As I recall, we did this twice, and by the time I left her place the second time she had convinced herself that I was the one for her and she was the one for me; that nothing would ever come between us, and that it would last forever. I wasn't so convinced. In fact, for the longest time I didn't even know any of this was going on. It had never even occurred to me. Maybe she thought we had a better chance to make it together, you know, *to the end of time* if I stayed somewhat in the dark when it came to the details.

There is—at this point in my life—nothing very special about me. Though forty years younger, there was even less special about me then. (By that, I mean now I can play an awkward contrived blues on the ukulele and can find my own ass without a road map.) With average height, average build, average looks, I have always (regrettably) laid proud

claim to a less than average mind and, due to damnable Fate, a perpetually lower than average income. In those days I was excruciatingly shy (my skin had just begun to clear up after many years of crippling humiliation) and I worked in the university cafeteria for something like \$3.23 per hour (maybe less, I don't recall). I've been told that I can be charming—I guess that's true for most of us—but if I had actually been so at any time in Celia's presence it had been inadvertent. If I had said anything enticing, seductive or suggestive in her presence, I was unaware of it. Furthermore, my extreme shyness in those days caused me to put up defenses that most people read as either pure arrogance or uncut stupidity, both of which I understand to be repulsive traits.

About that, let me only say this (quickly), I'm not arrogant. Socially awkward is the phrase I think which probably best described me then, and comes pretty close to describing me today in my 60s. So, I can not even guess why Celia decided I was the guy for her. I can not even guess.

But, she was serious about it. I mean, if your home has recently been reduced to a pile of ashes and your brother is in the hospital and you have to quit school in order to be whisked off to the comfort of your familial nest somewhere in Europe, documenting an eternal commitment to someone you studied history with twice might, quite reasonably, be the last thing on your mind. But for Celia, it wasn't. She took the time to dash off a little note before climbing into the backseat of her Rolls Royce. That's commitment.

I have to admit, I was somewhat relieved to see her go.



Nonetheless... you know, nonetheless.

As said, prior to seeing her escorted into that Rolls Royce I had no idea that Celia “came from money.” Had I known, it would not have changed anything, because I can tell you this: it gets pretty goddamned tiresome hearing someone you hardly know tell you how deeply they love you and how they can NOT live without you no matter how much money they have. And it turns creepy, and becomes even a little frightening when you bump into that person almost everywhere you go...by accident...or wait, can it be FATE? It could only be Fate, for I never touched her, never kissed her, never addressed her by her name that I can recall. Knowing me back then, I never even looked her directly in the eye. So, quite naturally then, she found herself irresistibly attracted to me.

Maybe she thought I was unaware of all that she was going through; or indifferent. How could anyone be so blind, so cruel?

Celia—finding herself incapable of living without me—decided that I would not be allowed to live without her. She started showing up wherever I went. I’d be in a bar—Oh, look, there’s Celia. I’d be in the library—What a surprise to bump into you, Celia. At breakfast—Isn’t that that Celia-chick, staring at us? She showed up at my dorm and waited downstairs until I came down to declare, once again, her undying love. She pounced upon me in the hall as soon as I emerged from my classes. She gave me that sick-cow look so often in history class that I stopped going. One day, on the street, when she saw me speaking with another girl, she stepped in between us, begging me and pleading with me to *come back to her*. In stark contrast to the simple fact that I

had never been with her, the fact that I had never left seemed moot. Clearly, Celia was insane. There was, please hear me, little comfort in that.

Here's how far it went: another time I spied Celia from a distance talking animatedly to an acquaintance of mine, a girl by chance, in front of the college bookstore. There was maybe just a little too much wild gesticulation going on for it to be a friendly conversation. And from that moment on that poor girl avoided me like the plague. When I eventually managed to corner her, and asked why, she looked around nervously and mouthed one word, "Celia..."

I don't know when, precisely, Celia decided that she could not live without me, but by anyone's standards it was really, truly, much much much too soon. I think it had something to do with her father though. Her father had had some kind of "event" and she'd taken off to see him in the hospital; when she returned she knew I was the one for her. (This very same series of events would set me up for my second stalker 20 years down the road.) But if I were asked to guess why Celia was so solidly hooked on me, I would have to say maybe it was because I had been willing to do something for her that I had never done for anyone else before—something I had rarely done even for myself—take notes.

Celia had missed a class when her father had his 'event' and I took notes for her. But, her view—if indeed that was her view—that this was an act of undying love was misinformed. If my notes were an indication of anything, they were an indication of how utterly useless my notes

were. I didn't even understand my own notes (though I may have understood them during the instant I took them); I couldn't imagine how they could be of any help whatsoever to anyone.

Here, make sense of this if you can (and then, *please*, try not to fall in love with me):

Henry Biltrop/1674 (17? 70?) long years to find source (look up dep. date)/at what latitude?/previously failed attempts/wife connection Scientific Comm./diso. Hoax?/was it a thumb/was it a tailbone?/joke's on us (them S.C.)... [he says this is important] later known for mixture specimen ~~re~~ preserved PRE—Biltrop's mixture or B's fix? (which) was B Biltrop or billings (look up pg 334 not 343) What did then? See charge hem? a dye/universally used. th'other ~~useless~~ used less (find out which) /rights stolen by partner's partner's SON (partner's partner? That's the real question. Would make a good play.) surviving son/1902 award (IMPORTANT: relates back to that childhood being thrown from the pony thing!!) Just like MY brother up a tree.

I must have had about 2 or 3 pages of these *notes* with me on that lovely liberating rainy day. That's what I was heading over to Celia's for—to compare notes. My guess is, hers were somewhat more comprehensive.

Celia, wherever you are—I will never forget you either. We were kids. These things happen. I'm sure your house has been re-built by now. Tell your husband thanks. I'm sure he's smug, good looking, and perfectly comfortable, at your side, in a nicely-fitted suit, riding to hounds, or simply strolling about amid life's continual banquet, basking in the ever-warm embrace of society.

## AN ANGEL, FRAIL AS A TEA CUP

After the first school break in my freshman year, I was sitting in the little park across the street from where I lived one fine bright sunny day, alone, bemused, confused, when a girl walked up and made me very nervous by sitting down right beside me. She made me even more uncomfortable when she addressed me directly.

“You’re Romeo,” she said in a soft and syrupy Southern drawl.

I looked at her startled. “Uh...What did you say?”

She continued. “That’s what Joanie calls you: Romeo.

Well, that’s what we all call you.”

I was surprised by every aspect of what was unfolding—the stranger (a girl) sitting down right beside me (very closely); speaking to me (directly), in a pretty southern manner; calling me Romeo (which I was not); admitting to some kind of weird conspiracy (“that’s what *we all* call you”).

“I’m Suzanne,” she said boldly. “And my very dearest friend, Joanie, wants to meet you. But, alas,” she sighed dramatically, “she is just too shy to venture to speak to you.” She stopped, she put one finger to her chin in thought. “I think, therefore,” she continued, “that *you* should embolden yourself to go over and introduce yourself to poor little Joanie.” She pouted in an exaggerated manner. “Don’t you agree?”

“I should?” She was asking me to do the impossible.

“Yes. You should. You know you should, don’t you? You two would love each other ferociously, I just know you would.”

"I should go over and introduce myself?" This girl who I'd never seen before was asking me to stick my head in a lion's mouth.

"Yes," she said emphatically. "I insist. I absolutely insist."

"Where does she live?" I asked, though I do not know why.

"Oh, right over there at 833 Park, in the women's dorm.

Just go on over there and ask for Joanie. She's really as shy as can be, frail as a tea cup, very pretty and very very sweet, and, she's just dying inside for the want of meeting you."

This peculiar young woman looked at me while she waited for me to respond, but I didn't know what to say to this proposal. Whatever else was going on, I was still as shy as any reasonably functioning person could be, and completely confused. First, Celia would have loved me forever and now this tea cup frail child was dying to meet me, literally, apparently. I have to borrow a phrase from my wife here and say, "Gosh." That pretty much captures what I was thinking.

"Please," she pleaded.

"Well, see, I..."

"Yes, I know, you're every bit as shy as she is." She closed her eyes tightly and spoke with exasperation, "Joanie has absolutely forbidden me to talk to you." She opened her eyes and said, "But somebody has to do something!" The urgency embedded in that statement made me look up at her. "So," she concluded, "maybe you could happen by tomorrow and go in and just ask for Joanie and, well, simply introduce yourself." It sounded so easy. "Although," she said, "I'm fairly sure she already knows who you are." "OK," I said, and suddenly infused fully with a spirit that I didn't know I possessed I rose from that bench. "What's

the address again?" She repeated the address, pointed in a most feminine manner in the right direction, and I started walking.

"You'll go by then? ...to see her? ...tomorrow?" she shouted after me.

"No," I said emphatically, mostly to myself. "I'll go right now." Destiny itself was behind the wheel and its foot was on the pedal. I felt like dancing. I felt slightly sick to my stomach. But, I was being carried away by an irresistible force.

Arriving in front of 833 Park Avenue, of course I wasn't so bold any more. Somehow the inspiration that took me there abandoned me in front of the place, dumped me at the foot of the wide wooden steps. I no longer felt like dancing, though I still felt sick to my stomach. More than that, I felt like running away. But something inside me was putting up a valiant struggle. I stood outside of the building for a long time. I was trying to convince myself that I could do what any other young American male was capable of doing and, to my own surprise, after standing there for three consecutive eternities, I mounted the steps with the bold determination of a man on his way to his own execution. Upon entering the building I found myself facing a young girl seated behind a small desk next to a large, intricate, polished wooden stairway.

"Visiting hours are not until one," she said coldly without looking up from a large book in which she was writing. I did not move. When she looked at me I guess it was obvious that this statement had gutted me. I must have been

a pitiful sight. "Unless it's an emergency," she added conspiratorially.

"Well," I stammered, "It is kind of an emergency. I mean I don't think I can ever do this again if I don't do it right now."

And that was true. If I did not at that very moment follow through and meet this young woman who was dying from wanting to meet me, this frail as a tea cup Southern beauty, then I might not ever again capture the courage to do it. My heroine behind the desk heard the sincerity in my voice. She looked up at me and knew that every word of it was unquestionably true. She leaned over the desk a bit toward me and whispered, "Who are you looking for?" "Joanie," I said quietly.

The girl lit up, apparently delighted. She picked up a phone, dialed a number and announced joyously over an intercom "Joanie, you have a gentleman caller." The announcement rang throughout the entire building. Then she locked a smile onto me as she waited with the receiver pressed to her ear. "Romeo," she whispered into the phone. "Yes," she insisted. "Right now! Yes, right here in front of me. OK. Hurry." Then she addressed me with dramatic dignity, "Please have a seat in the sitting room; Miss Marion will be right down."

Immediately girls started appearing in the corners and leaning over the stairway railing and strolling arm in arm together, just by chance, through the foyer, and a sour looking older woman soon appeared in the doorway behind my heroine, with her arms folded across her chest. With her appearance the girls all vanished as quickly as they had

appeared. She walked up beside the girl at the desk and soon they were engaged in an animated argument of some sort which lasted until Joanie came drifting like a flower down the staircase.

She was all dressed in white, with lace up to her throat, more like a Gibson Girl than anything from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She stood before me and smiled broadly, looking into my eyes. The older woman said, "Miss Marion, your gentleman caller must sign in."

Joanie said, "That's OK, we'll just be stepping outside." The woman insisted. "All the more reason. You must sign in if you are visiting with one of our young ladies, young man."

So, I went to the desk and the girl at the desk winked at me (may God bless her throughout eternity) and pointed out a line in the book where I was to write my name and address and the date and the time I first met Joanie Marion, frail as a tea cup and more charming than an angel. If that book still exists somewhere, I'd love to pore through it and find that page and just get a look at it. As I signed I was shaking like a leaf.

That done, the woman frowned at me, the girl behind the desk clapped her hands together in silent enthusiastic approval, and Joanie placed one hand inside the crook of my elbow and escorted me outside, where we walked and talked, and fell completely, irretrievably, deliriously in love.



## THE GRANDE DAME

I'd been in Richmond for almost eight months when one bright, sunny Sunday morning, my very timid and truly lovely Southern girlfriend, Joanie, and I were strolling arm-in-arm, down Monument Avenue. We were softly, sweetly, deeply, purely in love and it had just turned Spring. The birds were chirping in the newly flowering trees, the sky above was blue, there was a gentle breeze; it could not have been more idyllic.

Monument Avenue was exquisite! It was a perfect little neighborhood, strictly reserved for some of Richmond's oldest and most highly respected (and by that I mean richest) families. As you travel along that boulevard of white stone mansions, huge bronze equestrian statues rise up on islands at the end of every block; noble Confederate Generals on proudly prancing horse—each, sword drawn, eyes ablaze with assured victory, all defiance, spurs, and indefatigable determination—gallant bronze heroes of the most highly esteemed purest Southern order.

Joanie and I were like two puppies just emerged, after huddling together in our little basket, to explore the wonders of the big world beyond with wide and eager eyes. Whatever I may be now, whatever I may have become, back then I was a perfect match for this lovely little mouse of a girl. One could hardly find two more harmless people. She was more timid than I and, honestly, I hadn't looked anyone in the eye since childhood and rarely spoke in public above a stammering whisper.

Joanie was purity itself; she was like a doe in the woods, she was like a lamb. If there is a creature more gentle, more timid, more graceful, I have never heard of it. I'll tell you how nice she was: she was kinder and lovelier than anything I'd ever seen. It's too heavy-handed to say that she was pretty and quiet and shy. She was painfully, horribly, excruciatingly shy. And, she was crushingly beautiful. She was truly something very much like an angel. Angels could learn a thing or two from her about sweetness and composure. Properly cast, angels would have looked very much like her. Her skin was the palest pale. She had large trusting eyes, a full, joyful, giving mouth, and tons of cascading tumultuous chestnut hair. She was femininity itself; soft-spoken, light of foot, always a lady. God would do better to make more like her.

Me, though nothing like that, timid and unsure, I was her champion nonetheless. So there we were, two innocents, strolling along, in love, in the Spring, surrounded by trees and heroic statues and large, stately mansions with perfectly manicured lawns.

On the sidewalk ahead, tottering slowly toward us, is a tiny (tiny) ancient (ancient) gentlewoman. She has on her white kid gloves because it is Sunday; because it is Spring, her broad brimmed flower bestrewn chapeau; because she is an aristocrat, a nice dress with lace at the collar and sleeves. Her suit is of a pink nubby material that we've all seen before on the cover of Vogue. She is unquestionably, immediately recognizable as precisely what she is: venerable, old Richmond, First Family Virginia, nobility. She's on her way home, fresh from church.

As we get close, Joanie—a true Southern belle herself, and brought up properly—bows to this grande dame and says sweetly, "Why, good morning, Ma'am." Joanie's voice is overflowing with genuine courtesy; her words ooze a syrupy Southern charm.

This tiny, rheumy-eyed, frail old creature stops in front of us, smiles broadly at Joanie; there is a twinkle in her eye. She reaches out with one little nicely gloved hand and touches Joanie's wrist. In a kindly old voice with a slight quaver to it she says, "Why, good morning to you dear. How are you?" Though they've never met, it's as if they have known each other for years; they share gentility. Joanie says, "It's a lovely day, Ma'am." "Yes, dear," says the gentlewoman, "it most certainly IS a lovely day." She looks around to admire the day that the Lord has given us.

I'm smiling during this exchange, because I'm an idiot and I'm in love and I'm watching something I've never witnessed before: two Southern ladies meet on the boulevard; they smile and exchange bubbly greetings. This doesn't even seem real to me. I've only seen such exemplary courtesy before in old movies. Where I come from two women passing each other on the sidewalk seldom exchange words; they may mumble or grunt; occasionally one will spit—a sign at once of recognition and utter disregard. So, Southern charm is all new to me.

Then the old woman turns to me. I'm smiling down at her, this minuscule, fragile, gentle, distinguished old lady. She looks up at me. She begins to quiver; she points a shaking

gloved finger directly at my face, dead center, and says, "I can remember a time when we didn't allow *NIGGERS* to walk on this street, let alone people like YOU!"

It is difficult for me to convey the viciousness behind that statement, but, that is precisely, word for word, what the grand old lady, remnant of the great and glorious South, said to me on that lovely Spring day. She shook with rage as she said it. Yes, there I am, the epitome of all things vile, the physical embodiment or Evil itself. In the eyes of the respectable South, I am despicable.

Here's the strange part: throughout all of this she's still got Joanie by the hand. As she leans forward, snapping and snarling and sputtering and throwing off saliva in all directions, she's leaning on Joanie, counting on her for support. She's standing there, shaking with an uncontrollable fury, clinging to my girlfriend. Her watery old yellowed eyes are locked in on mine; the frail old bat is challenging me. She's got her chin up, her jaw set, while she awaits my response. I'm an eighteen year old, six foot tall, 160 pound man. After staring at me with revulsion long enough for me to get the point, she shakes her blue-grey head in disgust, pushes her way between us, and totters off, down Monument Avenue. (I'd like to say that she spit on the sidewalk but she didn't. I'm pretty sure she could have though. That would have been a nice touch...for my purposes here.) How had it come to this?

When she approached us, I smiled nicely and bowed a goofy little kind of bow. And while the ladies exchanged greetings I stood in silence with my hands folded neatly in

front of me—gloating, a fixed grin plastered idiot-like on my amiable, pale, pock-marked face, just as nice as can be. While these two examples of code-encrusted social order exchanged niceties on that particular beautiful sunny Sunday morning I was, in short, the perfect gentleman.

As a child I was taught a special deference toward females and exceptional consideration for old ladies. In fact, let me put this forward here—throughout my entire life, if any little old lady (ANY little old lady), even one whom I'd never met before, had approached me and asked me to haul her piano up thirty-two flights of stairs while wearing roller skates, I'd have given it a shot. That's just the way I was brought up. I'd have given it my all. And when it was over, I would have smiled nicely, and thanked her for the nickel. At no time did anyone ever tell me such creatures could be vicious. (And, I wouldn't have guessed it either.) So the *fear* that this particular old woman planted in my heart that day was catastrophic.

None of my upbringing had prepared me for meeting this tiny spuming Southern aristocrat on the sidewalk, on Monument Avenue, in Richmond, Virginia, on a Sunday, in the Spring. Nothing in her time here on earth had prepared our grande dame for running into anything as shameful, as disgraceful, as foul and disgusting as me. She just wasn't ready for it; Sunday morning wasn't ready for it; Monument Avenue wasn't ready for it; Richmond wasn't ready for it. It must have only irritated her more to see that I had a lovely little Southern girl clinging lovingly to my arm. (I know that many French people feel that way about

me because of my loving French wife...most notably, I think, her father.)

In those halcyon days, due to some peculiar glitch in the American psyche, there was no greater crime on earth than for a male to have long hair. So, admittedly I was a criminal. Almost everyone I knew was. Long hair was a particularly vile, and almost unforgivable affront to every sniveling soul. We were looked down upon by the lowest, and mocked by the most ignorant segments of society. At home, previously loving, previously reasonable parents struggled with the enormity of the problem; straining to see, underneath all that growth, the son they'd raised right and had once loved without confusion. (Apparently, we were a nation with a lot of time on its hands.)

In those days, real hippies were seen driving around Richmond, the sides of their bus painted with the slogan: "We've Come for Your Daughters!"—a sign that perfectly expressed the fears of an entire nation—but I wasn't a hippie; I was a middle class college student. I had never smoked dope, had never taken a drink, and my intentions toward Joanie could not have been more honorable. On this Spring morn, my button-down shirt, cotton twill pants with cuffs, my respectable nicely polished shoes—all of which my mother had purchased for me at J. C. Penny—carried no weight. My white, middle class background, my solid SAT scores, the tears that filled my eyes when our astronauts were shot hurtling through the atmosphere; the increased rapidity of my pounding heart as the flag of our country waved bravely over a wide swath of chalk-lined green turf while the Star Spangled Banner blared from a

plethora of searing horns; the thanks that I gave joyously to Heaven above when I heard birds welcoming the morning with their inalienable chirpiness, all held no value. The length of my hair outweighed them all.

Admittedly, my hair was what they called long in those days—it touched my ears on the sides, my collar in the back. And, by going out in public like that I flaunted my crime. It would have only taken a pair of scissors and an ounce of, if not self-respect, at least a tendency toward the commonest of common social decency for me to expunge my crime. But I didn't. I chose instead to walk around offending everybody.

Only let me put up a kind of defense here, if I may (and then we'll be done with it). My hair was not as long as the hair on the heads of most of the cold bronze Confederate heroes that line Monument Avenue. My hair was not as long, for example, as the hair of the always reluctant Jefferson Davis. Nor was it, by the way, half as weird. (Take a good look at a picture of that guy sometime.) It was not as long as the bigamist, Stonewall Jackson; though I had more on top than that cowardly Indian killer. My hair was about the same length as J.E.B. "Jeb" (for those of us who can't spell) Stuart's, but, shorter in back than the great and noble Robert E. Lee's. In sum: my hair was shorter than 3/5 of the highly honorable and greatly honored confederate generals proudly on display that day on that Boulevard of Honor. And, I believe I should have gotten some credit for this too: neither did I sport their unruly beards. I was more cleanly shaven than 5/5 of them. Also, I want no credit for it, but only wish to mention in passing,

that I neither chewed tobacco, nor spat, nor used vulgar language. I should, at this point, rest my case. I rest.

But childishness awakens in me one final thought. It occurred to me at the time that my hair was not near as long (as you've probably guessed already), as Jesus'. For proof, look to the picture which, more likely than not, hung in whatever church this flinty old woman was on her way home from. I'm sure you've heard that argument before. (Apparently it carries no weight.)

At any rate, until we met this grande dame of the never dying Confederacy on that sunny Spring morning I hadn't yet been officially welcomed to Richmond. I hadn't even been welcomed by the college. In fact, they'd told me in December that my artistic skills were not good enough for me to remain there. My tearful plea that I didn't claim *to be* an artist but that I had come there *to learn that*, only made a kind of vague sense to the RPI administration after my advisor, Jack Solomon, stood up for me and explained the very nature of their institution to them. As we stood there on Monument Avenue that day, a decision was being made, based on a special portfolio I was asked to submit, whether I would be *allowed* to continue to study Art.

So, there we were standing there, stunned. Joanie, bless her sweet soul, was almost in tears; she was gasping for breath like a fish—a pretty little fish, a lovely, proper little fish; perhaps an angel fish. She was staggered, like a prize fighter who'd just taken one unexpectedly in the bread basket...a pleasing little sweet-eyed, somewhat startled prize fighter. She had to put one hand on my arm to steady



herself; had to place one hand to her chest out of some purely feminine instinct. The sniping had been so unexpected, the shot so clean and decisive, that neither one of us knew what to do or say.

Joanie began gasping out an apology to me. “Oh, I am so sorry...” she said. To her, I was a guest in her homeland and she felt responsible in some unexplainable way for this weird occurrence. Me—I was gasping too; caught so completely by surprise, wounded so neatly. Naturally I was ashamed of myself for having brought this about, for having put poor Joanie through it. I was also scared. It scared the hell out of me to discover that there was such hatred in the world. I’d lead such a sheltered life until that moment. We just stood there looking at each other for a while. Then I said, “I gotta get out of here.” I remember it so clearly. I didn’t know whether I meant Monument Avenue or Richmond or Virginia or the South, I just know it was a matter of serious urgency at the time. “I gotta get out of here.”

My fear, I think, was this: That woman had probably had children. She had probably filled them with venom and turned them loose to have a batch of their own little venomous vermin. They were all out there, somewhere, at that very moment, filled with a seething, nagging discontent. But, I didn’t feel that they were just out there somewhere, I felt like they were out there everywhere. Richmond was full of ‘em. Suddenly I realized I was surrounded with generations of bitter, spiteful and (really, after all) just plain stupid people. Was this the very best the South had to offer? Were these elegant houses, these

mansions, filled with people like that? Look, there's one now, glaring at us from behind hand-tooled French lace curtains. There was no forgiveness in the streets of Richmond in those days and I was a (self) marked man. The idea that my presence might draw fire and that Joanie might find herself involved in it sickened me.

I wish I had responded differently, although, I cannot say precisely how. I wish I would have said something. Ideally, I would have simply laughed it off. Alas, I missed the opportunity. That ability—to laugh things off (though I ache with admiration when I see others employ it)—has always been beyond me.

AN AFTERTHOUGHT, just an aside really  
Now that I think of it, we should have known better.

Sometime prior to our Easter awakening, at the downtown bus station, while we waited for the bus that would carry her away from me, I had kissed Joanie gently on the cheek. We were both in tears. I was holding her hand and comforting her quietly when a bulky bus station personage of some authority (clipboard) came stomping over and commanded, “You two are going to have to put an end to this vile public display of affection.” Vile public display of affection? Joanie and me?

As life would have it, a sailor in uniform was standing in a corner with—let’s be nice and say—his girlfriend, and they were, for all intents and purposes, forgive me if you must, dry humping. They were writhing and bumping, sweating, thoroughly entangled, emitting loud guttural sounds. The bus station guy didn’t have any problem with them however; he didn’t go over to them and request an end to their behavior.

Beyond our humiliation, underlying the painful embarrassment of it all, we were having real difficulty understanding what was going on.

At that point, being despised because of our looks was still pretty much beyond our experience.

## HELENA

Next to the building that was home for Mr. and Mrs. See, their daughters, their Laundro-Mat, a photographer named Paul, my paintings and me, was an old brick house which was unoccupied as far as I could tell. Although it was immaculate—picture-perfect, scrupulously clean—with freshly painted door and window trim, no one ever entered or emerged from that place, until one rainy Richmond afternoon. I was passing by there and came upon an ancient little creature with a grocery bag balanced awkwardly on her knee. She was leaning against the wall, tending to the groceries and struggling with the lock. If she was mumbling or cussing in a lady-like manner under her breath I wouldn't mention it here.

"Can I help you?" I said.

"This darned lock," she said, "It's been giving me no end of troubles lately."

It was funny because I'd just recently learned, by watching Mr. See, what can be done about that. "I'll be right back," I said. "Here. Set the groceries down for a moment, please; I'll be right back." I dashed to the Laundro-Mat, ran to the back where Mrs. See kept a bar of soap for people to rub across their collars before throwing their shirts into the machine. I grabbed the bar and skipped back quickly to the old woman. She had apparently given up on me and had renewed her struggles with the key.

When I came up behind her and spoke, she jumped. She placed one small gloved hand to her breast and said, "Oh, my goodness, you scared the blue-devil out of me. I thought you'd abandoned me."

“I just went to get this,” I said holding up the bar of soap. “Here, let me at it, I’m sort of an expert at this.” I wrangled the key back out of the lock and daubed some soap into the slot.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” she asked nervously.

“Well, if I do, it’ll save you \$30 for a locksmith. If I don’t, you’re going to need a locksmith anyway; these things, they don’t improve with use. Sooner or later,” I said, “this lock will fail.” The assurance I heard in my own voice had even me convinced. Apparently, only Houdini knew more about locks.

I re-inserted the key and turned it gently, with finesse. There was a nice solid sounding click. I stepped aside to demonstrate what I’d accomplished. “There you go.” I said smugly and pushed open the door for the lady to enter. She went in and set her bag down on a bench and turned to thank me. “For Pete’s sake,” she cried as the bag tumbled to the floor. “Lands almighty, I never had such a day.” When I started to pick things up for her she stopped me with a gloved hand on my shoulder. “My girl will be by later to help me put these things away.” I finished the job anyway, and stood up to admire my surroundings.

That building was even nicer inside than it was outside. From the entryway ceiling, which ran all the way up to the third floor, there hung a beautiful old chandelier. The hardwood flooring below it was divided into a large compass design of varied colored woods. Wide, plush, elegantly floral patterned carpets ran up the steps making several sweeping turns as they went.

"I've never seen anyone going in here before and I live right next door," I said, gawking around like a tourist. "Well, I don't get around much these days," she said, moving the groceries to a seat in an old wing-back chair. "I'd offer you a gratuity but I have to believe you helped me out of the kindness of your gentlemanly heart. I wouldn't want to tarnish a noble gesture with lucre." I laughed. "I'm Edward," I said, "I live above the Laundro-Mat."

"You mean you live with the Chinese?" She seemed shocked by this news.

"I rent a room on the top floor."

"I didn't know they rented rooms still. Oh well, I'll certainly have to keep a closer eye on my neighbors," she said chuckling and shaking her head. "I'm Helena Bell-Crane," she extended a tiny tightly gloved hand, "and you, Mitchell, are a *true* gentleman to help an old lady like myself."

I took her feather-light hand and felt, for a brief moment, like perhaps the proper thing to do would be to kiss it. But - I stifled the urge. For an instant further I felt that I should bow, but stifled that as well. Still, it had been an honor to be able to help her. Though I was no knight, she was undoubtedly a lady.

Later on, after we'd known each other for a while Helena would tell me, "You know, Mitchell, in my time, I was a great beauty." Looking into her fading blue-grey eyes, I could see that she probably had been. I envisioned her as a young lady surrounded with smarmy guys with little mustaches, all down on one knee, before her, fondling her gloved hand. There was a clever spark in her eye which

reflected her good-natured intelligence and hinted at a perfectly respectable, but perhaps, slightly wild past. She was a dignified 88 years old when I helped her get into her home on that rainy Richmond afternoon.

When I told her it was a pleasure to have met her, she smiled, patted my hand, and said, "It was a pleasure to meet you too, Mitchell," and when I stepped outside, the sun came bursting through the clouds in full glory.

## **SOMETHING ABOUT NAMES**

The first time I took some pants downstairs to have them hemmed, Mrs. See, the Laundro-Mat owner's wife and my landlady, asked, "What's the name?"

I said, "Edward."

She said, "What?"

"Edward," I said, and started to spell it for her. She put one hand up to stop me.

She said, "Bill. OK?" and wrote BILL in large letters on the claim ticket before handing it to me. That settled it. No argument. For her purposes I was Bill. Her husband knew me as Edward, but that didn't matter; to her I was Bill.

When I showed up to pick up my pants a couple days later, she saw me coming and reached for a bundle wrapped in blue paper with the word "BILL" written boldly across one end of it. As long as I lived above that Laundro-Mat, I was Bill. I'd pass her in the hallway on the way to my room and she'd smile and bob nicely. I'd say, "How are you, Mrs. See?" and she'd smile back meekly while nodding, and say, "Bill..."

The nice old woman who owned the house next door to the Laundro-Mat called me Mitchell, for reasons I've never understood. I have no idea where she got that idea—but I didn't really have a problem with it. It was a pleasant arrangement. To some people I was Mitchell, to some I was Bill. For some reason the Department of Motor Vehicles added an "s" at the end of my actual name one year, and for many years thereafter stubbornly refused to remove it. I was fresh to college, my skin was beginning to clear up, girls were everywhere, some of them liked me, I was flexible.



That explains why, one day when I was making my way through the little park across the street from the Laundro-Mat, the wino on one of the benches looked up, smiled a sloppy smile and slurred out, “Hey. HEY! Chucky-boy, Chuckeroo.” That was Slim.

I remember the first time I met him. So impressive was the weirdness of that meeting that I ran back to my room afterwards and started typing furiously. What I remembered became the opening scene of a play.

*It was summer. In the small city park there were two benches lined up end to end. Behind them—a hedge. In front of them—a statue of a war hero. A wino sits on one of the benches. Between his legs he holds a bottle in a paper bag. He holds it with both hands as if it might otherwise escape.*

While my clothes were in the Laundro-Mat I decided to catch some sun across the street. When I sat down, the wino was mumbling to himself.

“Look at all them fine people,” he said. “So fine, so good, so pure, so sure of themselves.” Speaking of sure of themselves, I was not sure if he was speaking to me, but I’d been raised to be polite. I sat there, a little nervous, attentive, trying to be a good listener. I mean, just because this old guy was as drunk as a skunk and smelled much worse than one, didn’t mean I shouldn’t allow him the dignity of common courtesy. On the strictly selfish front, I thought this might be a good opportunity for me to practice my social skills, with very little to lose.

I decided to try my hand at conversation, and cleared my throat.

"I'm just waiting for my wash to get done. Over there, you know, in the Laundro-Mat."

"Why here?" He snapped. "You oughta know better than that! You got yourself a college dee-gree." I didn't have a college degree, but it didn't seem a point worth arguing. "That won't help," he said contradicting himself. "You should know that by now."

I nodded agreeably despite the fact that I had no idea what the old guy was talking about.

"Glad to see your education is doing you some good," he said and smiled a crooked smile. His cold grey eyes were fixed on me. I quickly looked to the statue in front of me.

"Do you mean..?" I stammered.

The guy exploded with anger. "Course I mean!"

He calmed down as quickly as he'd exploded, saying quietly, confidentially, "They're all expectin' somethin' to happen." Suddenly we were buddies. "Not me an' not you though. Me- too old, too tired, too bullheaded. YOU- too well educated. You know better. Just waitin' to shove your clothes in a pillow case and trudge on home. Isn't that it?"

"Well, yes."

"Nothin' complicated in that."

This guy was scary. My instincts told me to get up and get the hell out of there, but my humanity—in those days it still spoke to me—told me to stay and work on my social skills, here in the park, at no cost, and maybe emerge a fully adjusted social butterfly. (In those days I still harbored that hope.)

"PERFECT!" he shouted. "But just look at THEM though. Oh, THEY JUST KNOW somethin' is goina happen. Don't

want to miss it.” He laughed to himself. “Want to be part of it. They think they got a better chance in their cars. Drivin’ all over...up ‘n’ down.” He pondered. “It’s always happening in the nex’ block though. Dog chasin’ his own tail. Cars!” he sneered.

“I guess I’m out of it then,” I said, “I don’t even own a car.”  
“Wasn’t accusin’ you anyway.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

“Can’t catch it. Too elusive. Me, I...” He forgot what he was saying. “Good education’s th’answer,” he assured me. “What you studying anyway?”

“Art History. Painting. Print making.”

He sat up properly and straightened his grimy old silk tie.  
“You don’t say?”

I laughed. “I guess it won’t do me much good- you know, without a car...”

“Sadly, I reckon not. But, THEY got *that* all wrapped up anyway. Without car- you are nothing! Drive all night, up in the morning, start all over. God bless America.”

He paused, he stood up half-way, he saluted smartly, he wavered, he sat. “Stick to it, by gid or by gad. Be CONSCIENTIOUS- you won’t miss a thing. YOUR big fat face on the flickering screen. THAT’S what THEY think! HA!” He covered his ears with his hands and shook his head. “I don’t want to hear it anymore.” The old guy was insane as far as I could tell.

“Well. I gotta go put my stuff in the dryer,” I said.

“Sit down,” he said, “This is gonna take a while.”

“Gotta go,” I said and got up to leave.

“Go on then,” he said and dismissed me with a broad swipe

of his hand. "What do I know? It was only hypothetical anyway."

"Pardon me?"

"*Pardon me?*" he said mockingly. "You're too anxious to join 'em, that's what I said." He looked me in the eye and his chin was quivering with rage. "And you heard me too. So, go join 'em."

"See you later, OK?" I said.

"It ain't OK. Maybe I don't want to see YOU later. Maybe I don't want to see you ever again. Maybe MY clothes will never get dry. I defended this goddamned country!"

I stopped and looked down at the poor guy. He was shaking his head in disbelief, saying, "Free advice, Don't even want none." He took a drink from his precious paper bag.

After folding my wash, I shoved it in a bag and headed back toward the park for more abuse. When he saw me coming across the street he purposefully, dramatically, slid to the center of the bench and turned his back on me. I took a seat on the edge of the next bench over and, closing my eyes, raised my face to the sun.

"Nice day," I said after practicing the words a dozen times in my mind, "Feel that sun."

"Oh? THAT?" He fiddled with the bag for awhile then sighed. "You're not the victim. I don't know why I always treat you that way."

"I'm not?"

"Neither the cause nor the cure." He offered the bag to me.

"Want some?"

"No thanks. I don't drink."

"I wish I could say that." He took a slug. He pondered a bit

then took another slug. "It don't make any sense," he said. "I'm outside today; can't seem to get anything done. The people stop to talk. Yes, They all want to talk to Slim all right. 'Hey Slim', they say. The time just goes by that way."

"I know what you mean," I said.

Suddenly he turned vicious again. "No you don't." As suddenly he was kindly again. "Want some?"

"No thanks. I don't drink."

"A horse on me then. Look down that way and see if you see any cops."

While I looked, he drank.

"What does that mean 'a horse on you'?"

"Do you see any cops?" he snarled.

"Nope, don't see any," I said.

"Keep lookin'," he said and for the entire time I looked I could hear him gulping desperately from the bottle. Then he put it quickly under his coat.

"See that car?"

"The Chevy?"

"Right on schedule. Yes sir, right on schedule."

"You think that's a cop?"

"Ha! Do you think you're you?"

"I don't think that was a cop," I said.

"You been studyin' that in your school have you?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Every day, this time, headin' in that direction. Or the other direction maybe. They're not as clever as they think though."

He shook his head and stared down at the bottle. He

removed it from the bag, and lifted it above his head to see how much was left and then put it back in the bag.

“You ever seen a wino do that before?”

“What?”

“Lift the bottle like that?”

“No.”

“Never see it again either,” he said and he took what was clearly the final swig. “Want some?”

“No thanks, I have to go.”

When I stood up to go, he stood up with me. “It can't get along without ya?”

“What?”

“Your laundry.”

“No, I just...better go.”

“Hey, let me tell you somethin’,” he said confidentially. “A lot of people don't like you college kids because they think you're kiddin' yourselves.” He snorted at the absurdity of that. “But I like you, ‘cause I *know* you're kiddin' yourselves.” He smiled. “Course,” he said, “I don't know if there's any comfort in that. Prolly very little.”

“Well I gotta go,” I said and turned. “Take it easy, OK?”

He shook his head dramatically. He snarled, “You think it's easy? You think it's EASY? After all I just taught you, you still think it's easy?” He looked down at the empty bottle in one hand, the empty bag in the other, and said, “For someone who don't drink, you sure managed to make me drink your share.”

Lessons learned—ZERO.

Social skills developed—NONE.

## HOWARD

I had just emerged from the Laundro-Mat and, by some peculiarity of fate, I was carrying a couple of books in a plastic bag. I don't think I'd ever seen a plastic bag until I moved in above the Laundro-Mat and don't recall ever carrying books in a plastic bag before. Nonetheless as they say...In those days the phrase, 'Paper or plastic?' had not yet been invented, but, the Sees were far ahead of the rest of the nation, they used plastic bags for everything. So I was passing by the Laundro-Mat and Mr. See—normally a quiet, unassuming man of diminutive stature and calm demeanor—was out on the sidewalk hopping mad. He was literally hopping mad; hopping up and down and pointing a wavering finger directly at Howard, who stood defiant, at a safe distance.

Howard began to stride away from the confrontation, but, then, apparently he felt the need to convey something further to Mr. See. I didn't know if he was bolstering a point which had already been made, or capping off his side of the argument, or just adding a footnote. At any rate Howard stopped on the corner and turned and said something that I didn't catch because of passing traffic. But, Mr. See caught it, and Mr. See exploded. His face turned red and he shook all over. "PLICK?" he shouted. "You call *me* a plick? YOU the plick. You hear me? You the fliggin' PLICK!"

Mr. See stomped back into the Laundro-Mat...but emerged again seconds later and shouted, "YOU the plick!" He stood there trembling until Mrs. See came out and barked at him in Chinese, ordering him, in tones understood by any

married man in any language, to go back inside. She glared at Howard for a bit, then switched her gaze to me, softened, smiled, nodded nicely and said, "Bill."

That left Howard and me facing each other at about sixteen feet. I was looking at Howard wondering what the hell had gone on, and he was looking at me like he didn't really like what he saw but maybe I could be of some use to him anyway. Howard came up to me as if he might either own the entire world or, at very least, was close personal friends with the guy who did.

"Can I have your bag, man?" Those were the first words Howard ever spoke to me.

"My bag?" I didn't have to think about it. I don't even know why I had those books in that bag. "Sure." I took the books out of the plastic bag and proffered it.

"Thanks, man. That stingy little prick, See, wouldn't give me a fuckin' plastic bag."

"He wouldn't give you a plastic bag?" I was truly surprised.

This was unbelievable; Mr. See's entire life seemed to be filled to overflowing with plastic bags. If anyone in this world had a plastic bag to spare it was Mr. See. In the Laundro-Mat there were huge cardboard boxes of used, crumpled plastic bags and 55 gallon cardboard barrels full of large plastic bags, there were plastic bags in every garbage can and huge, monstrous, rolls of endless plastic bags of various sizes hanging from the ceiling. Plastic bags were everywhere in that Laundro-Mat.

On top of it all, as I may have said already, I'd known him to be a reasonable and fairly giving man. In a world where



rent in a questionable part of town was \$35 a month for a flat, I paid Mr. See \$27 a month for a place in a good part of town, overlooking a small park.

Howard wanted someone to hear his side of the matter, to understand, to agree with him, to recognize the injustice he'd experienced. Since I was the only one around, I was it. He explained. "Listen to this, man. I walk in there and I say, 'Gimme a plastic bag, will you?' and he said, 'Three cents.' I said, 'Three cents? Are you kidding me? I ain't payin' three cents for a fuckin' plastic bag.' He said, 'Plastic bag; three cents.' I laughed. Man, I couldn't believe it. I said, 'You greedy little foreign prick,' and he hit the ceiling. Man! Well, you saw it." Howard looked at me, raised his eyebrows soliciting agreement. I didn't know what to say. Poor as I was, three cents didn't mean a damned thing to me.

I said, "Well, I think Mr. See is a pretty straightforward business man."

I also knew him to be, under most circumstances, even-keeled. I said, "As long as I pay my rent on time there is no problem." It was a good arrangement. I liked dealing with Mr. See. If something went wrong in the building, he came by and fixed it, usually the very same day. Faucet's leaking, you shove a note under Mr. See's door in the morning, in the afternoon, the faucet no longer drips. He never interfered with my perpetual comings and goings, or complained that I played my record player too loud (which I did) or asked me why I was up pacing around above their heads at four in the morning (which I did), or why he could look out, across the street once in a while and see me

talking to winos in the park (which he could). Mr. See was OK. For all I knew he was right about Howard; maybe Howard was a plick. “I think Mr. See is alright,” I concluded.

Howard shoved the plastic bag in his hip pocket and walked across the street where he bounded up the brownstone steps. Some motorcycle gang guy in a denim jacket with torn off sleeves saw him coming and opened the door for him. Before going in Howard stopped, turned around and, after looking directly at me—a warning of some sort I guessed—disappeared inside.

Nice neighborhood. Interesting neighbors.

## BASIC SCULPTURE

There wasn't anybody I'd spoken to in my class who wanted to take Basic Sculpture IF that meant they had to take it from Mr. Sezonik. That was the word; I didn't know where they got their information, but it was good enough for me. So, when I went in to register for classes I specifically asked for sculpture under *anyone but Sezonik*. The woman behind the table, (unflattering description deleted out of kindness) sighed like she'd heard it all before, shook her overly large head in refusal, looked up at me with all the power vested in her little piggish eyes, said this: "Nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-no. Look, young man," she said, pointing her pen at me, "SOMEBODY has to take Mr. Sezonik's class." For her it was merely a matter of numerical distribution. She handed me back my schedule, saying, "Congratulations, you're it." She took a breath. "And, don't try to re-schedule; all the other instructors' classes are full."

As I started to turn and walk away she added decisively, "If you drop that class in hopes of getting someone else next semester, I'll *personally* see that THAT doesn't happen." I'd been chosen, along with six other lucky sheep, to go to slaughter in that man's class.

I'd seen Sezonik at the Village, a local bar where artists, art instructors, ruffians, bikers, pseudo-intellectuals, morons, perverts of every stripe, cops on leave for alcoholism and a select few local rednecks hung out. I didn't drink, but I loved being in that atmosphere...I felt like I was the smartest, cleanest, best looking and most innocent guy there. And I loved the Village sub—a big wonderful fresh

baked sandwich stuffed with cold cuts and cheese and some greens, fresh chopped onions, olive oil and vinegar. Of the two brothers, Nick, and the other one, Steve I think, Nick made the best sub; the bread crisper, the stuff inside more generous. (I don't know why I think you need to know that.)

Sezonik was a heavy hitter. By that I mean, he drank solely, exclusively, to get plastered. He also had an undisputed reputation as a brawler. No one who knew the man was stupid enough to engage him in drunken fisticuffs, no matter how honorable the cause. (And I say that because an amazing number of barroom disputes seem to have their inspiration in honor.) I'd been told that one time, when something of a brawl-like nature was about to erupt between Sezonik and some big redneck twice his size, Sezonik stood up and looked the guy right in the eye, and the guy simply backed away. This story was, more likely than not, literally (and I come from a generation where literally means actually) true.

Sezonik always wore heavy-weight work overalls. He had short-cropped hair and tiny oval wire frame glasses. He always had the final inch or so of a glowing cigarette hanging idly from his disdainfully curled lower lip. A vicious-looking scar ran from one eye down along his cheek and when he fixed you with his eyes it was always a challenge. He spoke quietly in an ice cold voice with a little bit of a stutter to it. His delivery was so challenging that if he said, "Please pass the butter," it came out as a direct threat.

First hand, I can tell you this:

One night, in the Village, there were a couple of bruisers in there, sitting side by side at the bar. They'd been nicking each other for a while I guess, and when it was suddenly silently and mutually decided that they had had enough of each other, they stood up to face off. Some insults were exchanged (bluster), followed by some (awkward and childish) shoving. Then Nick Sezonik stood up with a drink in his hand and a stub of a cigarette hanging from his lip, and he placed himself in between those two brutes. He exhaled, flicked the butt of his cigarette onto the floor and stood there, in the middle of the feud, looking off in the distance like he was expecting a ship to arrive from somewhere beyond the walls. I don't know what these two guys knew about Sezonik—maybe the act of standing up and planting himself squarely between them with such indifference was all the information they needed—but they both backed away as if he carried a loaded gun. I tell you this first-hand. I saw it. I will *never* forget it.

I always entered the sculpture studio with trepidation (or could you have guessed that?) Almost immediately we learned that, in class, Sezonik seldom spoke except to criticize, and his comments were usually snide. He'd stand directly in front of his squirming victim-of-the-moment, with his cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, and, squinting through the bitter smoke, almost conspiratorially, he'd whisper, "I like the way you've used your complete lack of aesthetic judgment to express utter contempt for anyone dull enough to waste their time looking at your so-called work, but, what about those of us unfortunate enough to come upon it in innocence?"

Because of his delivery everything he said was all the more chilling. It required him to take a few practice strokes at the opening word of his attack and then, to insert whole-note rests throughout. So, what might normally be, by any standards (I mean, if there are such standards), a lengthy lambaste became a test of both patience and memory skills. “C-c-c-can you explain to me what you th-th- think you are doing? C-c-can you tell me a-a-a-anything at all? Looking at what you’ve done so far I can’t even guess why you’ve d-d-d-done it. A-a-a-d-additionally, I’m having some difficulty understanding why it has taken you s-s-so long to accccomplish an effect which would mean nothing to any person, in any culture at a-a-anytime during m-m-man k-k-kind’s innnnn- habitanace of this planet.” This is the sort of thing he would say to you personally, quietly, while looking you in the eye. Worse were the times when he would raise one eyebrow, slam a mallet on a table top to get everyone’s attention, and say, “I want all of you to look carefully at this near-perfect example of a f-f-flawed and infantile v-v-v-vision with no discernable artistic purpose whatsoever.” Were we, each and every one of us, frightened of Nick R-r-r-ezonik? A-abbbsso llll-lutely.

There were like 7 of us huddled protectively together in a corner when he arrived on that first day; two of the cowering crowd—the smart ones among us—took flight before the first session was ten minutes old. By the second class, two more had dropped out...at least one in tears. By the third or fourth class there were only three of us left.

The other two survivors were Darryl Abraham—unqualified, the nicest, most honest and most decent man I have ever met beside my own father, and a girl from out in the sticks somewhere, named Doris who was as big as I was and maybe twice as strong. (Not as pretty though.)

Once Sezonik figured the three of us were worth his time, he took us all under his wing. I stood by and watched as Darryl and the mountain woman learned a few things about materials and techniques. All I learned was that I could not look Nick Sezonik in the eye or speak to him without stuttering myself... and I often wondered if he thought I was mocking him, or maybe a kindred spirit. At this distance, I think neither.

Even with his acceptance and encouragement I feared the man, I feared the class, feared going there to the point of almost vomiting when Tuesday and Thursday mornings rolled around; most of all I feared attempting to create sculpture of any sort. I feared even thinking about what I was going to attempt in that class. But, I was expected to produce or fail and somehow I came up with a design for a slab-sided thing which was 46 inches long and about 30 inches high, four inches wide from one end to the other, a kind of amorphic, bridge-type sculpture-like item, and a funny thing happened. When I brought it to class and set it on the table, he looked at it with one eye closed from across the studio, then came over to me and said quietly, "Tell me abbbb out this."

While maintaining a fixed focus on the tops of my shoes I said, "Well, it's a model of a piece which I imagine should

probably be 46 feet long. That would make it 30 feet tall at this point and four feet wide. This is to scale.”

“Mm-more...” he said coldly.

“Well, originally I thought it would be steel, unpainted, you know Corten or something that rusts, but after I completed the model I realized that *it wanted* to be made out of something more natural, like bamboo, uh, I don’t know maybe. I haven’t come up with the right material yet. I want it to read...well, first, I want it to read as lighter than it reasonably should be. And second, I want the viewer to look at it and KNOW that it is hollow. I didn’t want to try to convince anyone that it was solid when it wasn’t; I wanted it to be understood to be what it is...you know, a big hollow squirmy kind of thing.”

I had no idea where all that came from. It just came out.

“It’s nice,” he said, “finish it.” And then he walked away.

When I was leaving from class that day he stopped me and said, “I want you to think about how you would go about constructing that piece.”

“Per size?”

“Yes. It will not be done, not in this class anyway, but know-kno-knowing how a thing is to b-b-bbe accomplished is an important a-a-a-aspect of sculpture. That’s your f-f-first lesson.”

Man, I loved that guy.



## **NOR RAIN NOR DARK OF NIGHT**

A peculiar thing happened one fine rainy day as I was walking down Harrison Street, coming back from a class called "Introduction to the Static Arts". A bus stopped near the theatre on the corner, and as it pulled away a guy in the back leaned out the window and hollered, "Hey, you forgot your umbrella." Then, he tossed an umbrella at me. Of course my instincts allowed me to catch it, but I hadn't been on that bus. Despite the fact that I believe the umbrella is one of the greatest inventions mankind has ever come up with, I had never, until that very moment, possessed one.

I looked around for the people who might have gotten off that bus, but they had dispersed pretty efficiently into the drizzle with the exception of a very slow-moving old black woman. She seemed to be struggling as she tottered her way down Harrison Street. I didn't know how the guy could have confused me with her, a hunched over old woman in a long dark shiny plastic raincoat, but I ran after her anyway, on the chance. When I caught her I touched her sleeve. She stopped and looked up at me wearily. "Is this yours? She just looked at me. "Did you forget your umbrella on the bus?" She shook her head and started off again on her slow and torturous journey. That's how I came by the umbrella. I popped it open and discovered I liked it. I liked owning an umbrella. It leant a kind of phony-baloney dignity to things. I don't know why I had deprived myself of such joy in the past. Maybe it was because, in a world where pigs go for 50 cents a dozen, I couldn't afford to buy an imitation of a oink. I'm not an umbrella cost historian but I believe a good umbrella in those days

probably cost \$10, my monthly rent was 27.

I didn't know quite what to make of this wonderful gift, until that evening. It was raining heavily that night and I decided to take a break from staring at the painting propped up before me. I looked out the window, through the driving rain to the street below, the trees, the park, and I saw a figure sitting on one of the benches, alone, glistening wet. Even at that distance, in the dark, through the sheeting rain, I knew it was Slim. Even hunched over like that, with his collar up and his hat drawn down, I knew it was Slim. Slim, I was convinced, had enough misery in his life. I grabbed the umbrella and went galloping down the stairs. I dashed across the street. I stood before him.

"What are you doing out here in the rain?" I shouted.

"Sittin'. 'Bout you?"

"It's raining pretty hard- don't you have any place you can go?"

"Is that what they teach you in that art school?"

I started to sit. "Let me sit down." Slim made room for me but knocked the umbrella away with one gloved hand.

"Git that...away..."

I tried to put it up over us again, but he struck violently at the umbrella, knocking it away again. "Git that thing..."

OUT. Git out of here with that thing. Don't want it. Is that clear enough for you?"

"But it'll keep us dry."

"That's what they teach you in that school?"

I tried one final time to place it over his head—stretching my arm up high so that maybe he wouldn't notice—but he got up and walked over to the other bench and sat down. I shouted, "I just thought you'd like to get in out of the rain."

Slim said nothing. "It's only an umbrella!" I shouted.

Slim shouted, "How old are you?"

"What?" It wasn't that I couldn't hear him, I just didn't understand him.

He pointed at the umbrella. "It's that thing, Tin roof. I don't want that sound."

I felt like a fool sitting there with an umbrella while he sat just feet away drowning in the shower. "You want to hear me bad enough, you know what to do," he said.

I folded the umbrella, walked over and huddled beside the man. I adjusted my collar to keep the rain out and leaned over closer. "What are you doing out here in the rain anyway?"

"You think this is a proper place to conjugate?"

I laughed. "What? Conjugate?"

"Simple terms. I- that's me- want to be alone. I didn't know anyone was dumb enough- that's you- to come out here in the rain just to bother me."

"Yeah, but, I saw you from my window. I live up there, over the Laundro-Mat."

"Yes, I know. And I suggest, you go back up there, over the Laundro-Mat. I don't want none right now."

I thought about this. The entire scene seemed idiotic. I was getting very wet and my hands were beginning to freeze. The guy seemed immovable. "OK, if that's the way you want it, I just thought that..." I popped open the umbrella and raised it.

"Bah! You didn't think at all. That's the problem with you college kids." He turned his head violently away from me. I just left him sitting there in the rain.

## I ALMOST LEARN A THING

The next day, 5 A.M.—brilliant after the night of rain—I was on my way to work in the school cafeteria. Slim was still there, already drunk (or maybe still drunk), already stumbling around awkwardly, mechanically, near the benches. I tried to avoid him, but kept an eye on him as he stumbled and fell onto one of the benches. I stopped and observed while he pulled himself upright into a dignified sitting position and rubbed his eyes. Looking around, he saw me.

“Hey! Hello there, Buddy.” He pointed at me. “Albert Schweitzer, right? Good ol Albert, now HE cared. Albert cared. You’re jus’ lack Albert las’ night with your umbrella.” He laughed a snide little laugh.

I tried to walk right by him, but wanted not to hurt the man. “Work!” I shouted and pointed in the direction I needed to go if I was to stay employed.

“Listen, though,” he said and he got up and somehow intercepted me. He took my elbow and attempted to drag me toward the benches. “I wanted to tell you somethin...”

“Well, I’m on my way to work right now. Gotta feed my fellow students.”

“That’s OK, *feed my sheep*, I understand. B’ this is the REAL world. Come on, let’s go sit in the park. Got me a bench reserved for us. Real world. Me and you.”

He began to guide me gently but firmly toward the bench. I tried to explain. “I’d like to...” I said, “I wish I could...I have to go to work. Then I have a class.”

“Yes you do. Yes, you do,” he said and he put his arm around my shoulder.

“And I’m the teacher.” Slim sat down heavily and dragged me down with him. “Sit down.”

He sat there with his arm around me for a bit then withdrew it and placed both elbows on his knees. He shook his head and said, “I’m just a stiff, but I can tell a good Joe when I see one and I’m seein’ one right now.” He looked directly at me for an unbearably long time. “You did me right the other day, kid. Can you listen?”

“OK, but I have to be going pretty soon, OK?”

Slim sat, stared straight ahead, rubbed his face with both hands. “I ain’t belly up.” He said. “AND,” he raised a finger skyward, “I ain’t building no pyramids for no pharaoh kings. THAT’S the point. He looked searchingly into my face. “I jus’ wanted to tell you that. OK?”

“OK.” I said and started to get up.

“Wait, sit down. Have a drink, You got any wine?”

“No, I don’t drink.”

“OK then, that’s good. Can you listen?”

“I should be going.”

“It’s just... you need somebody bigger than yourself sometimes, OK?”

“OK.”

“You need a woman. You need God. Somebody BIG.”

I started thinking that somebody big—the manager at the college cafeteria— was going to be needing me, and looking for me and when he didn’t find me, thinking negative thoughts about me. So, I started to rise again.

“Sit. Sit down. Wait. It gets better.”

I sat.

“You know what I mean...bout somebody BIG?”

“I know what you mean.”

Slim looked at me. Then he shook his head sadly. "No you don't. You don't know." He pointed at the statue of the war hero. "You're jus' lack that guy. Metal skin, birdshit hairdo on an empty skull. That's you, Sonny boy."

"I..."

"I nothing. You say you know when you don't. You don't even got a clue. Sit down. I mean it." I sat.

"I get drunk sometimes. Sometimes I cry. You seen it. I cry. Rain serves a purpose. It's hard to find the truth. You have to hurt. On occasion..." He lost his thought. "You have to hurt till it rips, RIPS, your throat out trying to get out."

We both pondered that. "That's it! Nothin' but" Slim raised his right hand. "Swear."

"Well, OK," I said and got up. Slim put a big hand out to stop me, but I dodged him.

"Wait," he said and leaned his head over to one side very much like a dog might, pleading. It just seemed so pitiful that I sat down again.

"Wait!" Something suddenly occurred to him. "You got anything to drink on you?"

"No, I don't drink."

"It's a shame then. Sometimes everything is just too slick." He tapped his forehead knowingly. "I know that's not real. People don't see it that way though, They like it shiny. They like to see themselves in it. Not me boy! OK?"

"OK, but I better be going."

"Best education you can have- right here, This very damned spot." He pointed with both hands to the ground directly in front of us. "Looking up at that hollow guy is an education. Look at him! Learn a thing."

I looked at the statue while Slim described what he saw there.

"Nice young man. Give him a nice uniform, stick a gun in his hand, send him off to fight. Rump like iron. You ever go around t' th'other side and see that guy's rump of iron? He's all dignity and self-sacrifice. What'd he get?"

He looked at me. I shrugged.

"We don't even know his name. We coulda been pals."

"I think the name's on the plaque, in front. If you want me to..."

"So what?! So what? WE don't know his name. You sure don't know it."

"I think he's a confederate soldier..."

He looked at me in disgust. "Am I talking English? Who is he? That's what I want to know."

"Who is he?"

"Who is that hollow guy?"

"Some hero I guess."

"Exactly. Some hero. Some BIG hero. Some big DEAD hero. He's lookin' right at me, but still he's up there on that pedestal of his. He thinks he's better'n me because he's dead. I think I'm better'n him cause I'm alive." Slim spat.

"They oughta build doors shorter."

"Doors shorter?"

"I concluded that a long time ago."

"I'm lost," I confessed.

"Stick close then." He began to whisper. "Everyone would have to bow to get in. They'd have to watch that they don't stand up TOO tall when they leave you." He looked into my eyes to see if I'd gotten it. I hadn't, but I looked back at him and let my mouth crumple a little in one corner as if mulling on it.

Then I nodded my head as if suddenly struck with insight. It was just a ploy to get the heck out of there. I made a conscious decision not to utter, “Shorter doors...a-ha... yes!” while rubbing my chin in contemplation.

He winked at me. We were becoming old friends. “That's all I gotta say,” he said and got up and stumbled off in the direction of Main Street. I sat there for a couple astonished seconds before getting up and running as fast as I could toward the cafeteria.

I had my speech prepared: “Sorry. Over-slept.” I practiced on my way, “Sorry. Over-slept. Sorry. Over-slept.”



## DORIS

So Mr. Sezonik and I got along fine after he saw my sculpture-like thing—if getting along fine means one party trembles in fear at the sight, sound, presence or slightest movement of the other. The two remaining, legitimate, sculpture students seemed to please him with their work as well. It was a miracle. I'd been lead to believe that the average grade received from Sezonik for Basic Sculpture class was a "D" and the three of us were all heading toward "A"s. Or so we thought.

"Now that we've weeded out the r-r-riff-r-r-raff, let's get s-s-some work d-done," he said to his new disciples as we gazed up lovingly at our hard-ass instructor.

I was surprised that Darryl had made it because, after the first class he went up to Mr. Sezonik and, as was his way, calmly, man to man, said, "You know, Sir, I may be in over my head here. To be honest, Mr. Sezonik, I have no idea what you are talking about, and I have no idea, looking around at these sculptures—or whatever they are—what's going on in this place."

Mr. Sezonik said, "Well, m-m-Mr. Abraham, give yours-s-s-self a ch-chance. Stick around for a f-f-few classes and let's s-s-see what you can come up with b-before you q-q-quit." (Darryl Abraham developed into one of the most unique sculptors around, and at this writing he continues to produce wonderful, absolutely delightful, truly American pieces.)

The other one, Doris (I've often wondered what ever happened to her). ...almost immediately started producing *gallery quality* work which just blew everyone away.

Upper-classmen and other sculpture instructors and gallery owners were soon coming in to our class and looking at what she was doing. I remember one afternoon showing up to see a crowd around a bench where she had two pieces on display for grading. After the crowd had dispersed I was instructed by Sezonik to go over and have a look.

The first piece was a huge block of rough finished stone with a shattered shovel handle driven right through it at an angle. I looked at that with astonishment. I liked it immediately—for reasons which I still can not explain. I was astonished at the sophistication of the piece. It really did look like something you might see in a gallery somewhere. I had absolutely no idea how she had accomplished it. Next to that was a block of iron, semi-rough, about a foot square, with metal stitching and scars all over every surface. There was a four or five inch diameter tunnel leading inward toward the center of the thing, and inside, when you bent down to peer in there, there was a white porcelain egg suspended in the darkness. That was cool because, it was almost as if, when you bent down to look in there, you expected to see that egg. How that worked, I did not know either.

“So, see, you got this big block of solid iron, kinda rusty like...’bout a foot or so on all sides...and, somehow somebody has gone n’ drilled a nice sized hole in it. So, like...if you were to look inside there, what would you expect to see?”

“Oh, hell, I don’t know...maybe a porcelain egg... just kinda floatin’ around in there.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Basically then, there were two serious students of sculpture in that class. After looking at her pieces I felt I had to tell Doris how good I thought she was. After some planning, I took a deep breath and went over to her and cleared my throat and waited for her to look up from her work.

“Wow, Doris,” I said, shaking my head, “This stuff is incredible!”

[So, now, it's your turn. Guess what she said in response to that...]

“Thanks,” she said.

You probably guessed that part, but I defy anyone to guess what followed.

“So,” she said, “now I suppose I'm supposed to take you home and lay you.”

I didn't know what to make of that. And, honestly, I thought I must have heard her wrong, so I said, “No, really, this stuff is absolutely incredible. How did you get that handle through that stone or, I mean, how did you do it so convincingly?”

“You're wasting your time,” she said.

Since I didn't know what I could possibly say to that, I said nothing. But, she knew what to say. “You're not getting laid,” she said. “Not tonight.”

“I'm not, uh, trying to...” I shook it off. “I really like your work,” I said and started to walk away.

“You're not going to get laid today, Pretty Boy!” she hollered at me and hoisted herself up onto the bench to watch me as I left the studio. “Not today, Pretty Boy,” she shouted.

Pretty boy? This to a guy who perpetually kept his eyes focused upon his own shoe tops.

Doris was bigger and stronger and meaner than me. It was a frightening idea...and utterly repulsive. I didn't find her attractive in any way; the thought was near sickening. Add into that mix the simple fact that I had not yet, up to that point, ever 'been laid', and you can see how I might have regretted the misunderstanding. I really did like her work though. Everybody did. Even Sezonik, who began to spend more time at her side talkin' shop.

So, then I had two people I feared in Basic Sculpture class. I didn't know Darryl Abraham, but he was my only refuge.

Many years later, one of the other sculpture instructors who had worked with him described Sezonik as "Not really an institutional type." I think that evaluation may have sprung in part from his being asked to leave the school after riding drunken on the tail end of a hook and ladder truck one rainy night and flipping the thing over in the middle of Broad Street at 3 AM. Long before that event however Nick Sezonik had become one of my very few, very select heroes.

I did not learn

one goddamned thing

about sculpture

from that man.

## TREE STORIES

I returned to my parents' home after my first year of college righteously appalled by the criminal insensitivity loose in our society. At the time, by means unknown, I had become awash in profound feelings for all living things. So when I heard that Dad was planning to cut limbs off of the old tree out in the front yard I felt compelled to put a stop to it. He was in the garage with a stepladder, poking around looking for a limb saw, when the maneuvering began.

"You know," I said, "as someone who is studying art, I must tell you, aesthetically speaking, that that tree looks very nice just the way it is."

He looked at me, then ran the blade of a saw lightly between his fingers testing its sharpness.

"Really," I said, "I wouldn't touch a thing."

"Well," he said, while hoisting the ladder onto his shoulder and handing me the saw, "As someone who has never even pretended to study art, but as someone who has just read an article about trimming trees, I must tell you that that tree is in for some limbing."

We walked up the gravel driveway and circled around the front of the house and stopped off at a distance where we could see the tree as it stood in its full magnificence. As he marked in his mind each limb that had to come off, I admired the perfection of the thing uncropped and unmessed-with.

"Why?" I asked as we made our way across the lawn.

"Why what?" he asked as he propped the ladder against the trunk.

"Why are you going to cut branches off this wonderful old tree?" He stepped back to cast a cold eye on the problem from that angle.

“Because it needs it.”

“Why do you think it needs it?”

“It’ll be healthier for it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Trees need trimming from time to time. It’s something that has to be done.”

“And what about all those trees out there in nature; how do they survive without some middle-class guy with a rusty old saw giving them what they need?”

“They are pruned by nature; the winds and the rains take care of it.” At this point Dad set his foot on the first rung of the ladder.

“Oh, and this tree here, this particular tree, this one in our yard, is somehow excluded from such natural benefits?”

He was still looking up into the tree and, as he placed his foot on the first limb, he said, “Hand me that saw.”

I did.

One day, later, while we were discussing what he had done, my father told me this story:

*That reminds me of when I was a kid. The guy who lived across the street—a man named Schoeb—had an old poplar in his yard. It was 75 foot tall and must have been three foot wide at the bottom, a huge tree.*

*One day after work, Schoeb stopped in at a tavern somewhere along the way home—he liked schnapps—and when he stepped off the streetcar at the end of the street he was clearly drunk because he was singing loudly in German. When he was drunk, he did that.*

*For some reason, while navigating the length of the street, in a generally homeward direction, he fixed on that tree and decided that it needed limbing. He also decided that now would be the perfect time to do it.*

*Upon arrival, he went into his garage, procured a saw, came back and shinnied up to the top of that old poplar. He went right up to the very top, far as he could get, with a saw in one hand and a sense of duty in his otherwise muddled mind. Somebody in the neighborhood spotted him up there and before long a crowd had gathered across the street. They watched as he made his way down, cutting off every branch along the way. He spared none. Every branch from top to bottom slowly fell victim to his saw.*

*The neighbors were watching to see if he was going to fall off. Some bets may have been placed. And, it took him quite a while of course, but, he didn't fall. He made it back safely to the ground, and after cutting off the last remaining branch, he studied his work for a bit, dropped the saw and, singing loudly in German, stumbled into his house. When he was done, it looked like a 75 foot tall telephone pole.*

On that evening, my father and I talked on into the night. When I realized that it was well after midnight, and he had to get up and go off to work at 7:15, as he had heroically for years, I said, "I'm sorry I had no idea what time it was." My father replied, "There is nothing more important to me right now than talking with you."

## SUMMER OF FUN

One of my summer jobs was working for a company, called Keric, which painted structural steel in factories and mills around Pittsburgh. I'd been hired to work in their warehouse, and my first day there a huge semi-truck pulled up in back of the warehouse with 125 20 gallon cans of red lead. Some of them were stacked two high. It seems to me that each of those cans weighed something like 100 pounds (possibly more, I can't recall). It was heavy stuff at any rate, you couldn't lift it, you had to drag it. The cans were stacked in the front of the trailer, as far away as they could possibly be for our purposes. It would be our job to off-load that red lead and get it into the warehouse.

There was another kid my age, a black kid named Lamont, working with me; it was his first day on the job too. I'm not a genius and I'd never worked a warehouse job before, but I knew this was the kind of job where some lummoX with a fork lift drives up a ramp into the trailer and hauls the damned things out on a wooden pallet a dozen at a time. The problem was that the cans were not on pallets and although there was a forklift sitting over in the corner of the warehouse, we were forbidden to use it. We were not authorized, they said, not trained, not licensed and not authorized. So our savior sat, a cold bright yellow hunk of indifferent steel, in the corner.

The supervisor who oversaw our work was a guy named Garret, who took an immediate dislike to me. My guess is that Garret hated me even before I had arrived. He'd been told that someone with pull had given the order to hire me and the implication was that I should be treated like



someone who knew someone, which is exactly what he did. After seeing me—a young, not-necessarily-stupid, not-necessarily-ugly kid with a future—he hated me all the more. Garret had none of what I had. He did, however, have authority over me.

Standing behind the open trailer, his instruction went like this: “Ok, you two, get those ‘kin’ cans of red lead off there and put it...Christ, I don’t know...put it in the ‘kin’ corner over there out of the way.”

“How many cans are there?”

“What the f’k difference does it make...you’re here to work aren’t you? Just get them off that ‘kin’ truck and put ‘em, NEATLY, in the ‘kin’ corner. If you’re not done by 5, don’t worry you’ll have tomorrow to finish up. But, the ‘kin’ driver needs his ‘kin’ tractor back tonight and that ‘kin’ trailer needs to be EMPTY tomorrow. ”

Lamont and I got the red lead down to one level—which was hard enough—and dragged maybe three, maybe four of those cans of red lead from the front of the trailer to the back before he sat down covered in sweat, leaned back on his hands and declared, “I don’t need this.”

I said, “What?”

He said, “I don’t need this job that bad.” I watched stunned as he jumped down and walked with determination through the warehouse, through the doors into the offices...never to be seen again.

I was sitting on a can of red lead trying to regain my breath, when Garret came out, stood below me at the end of the trailer, scratching his head. “How you gonna do it?” he asked.

“How’m I gonna do what?”

“Off-load all that ‘kin’ red lead by yourself?”

“I’m supposed to do this by myself now?” I whined.

“You gotta. You’re the only guy we got out here now that the black kid quit.”

“Lamont quit?”

“Yep. So, you better figure out how you’re gonna get all that ‘kin’ red lead off that ‘kin’ goddamned truck.”

“I might quit, myself,” I said with the small bravado I could muster.

“Yeah, well,” he said scratching his head, “DO what you gotta do.” He spit before walking away.

What I *had to do* was make enough money that summer to stay in school. Otherwise I knew that my entire life would be spent dealing with morons like Garret. I have to give him credit, HE knew it too. He knew I would stay. What he didn’t know is that I would actually haul all those cans off of that trailer, by myself, without (known) use of a forklift or the help of anyone else. It would take me two days, but I would do it.

Part of it was luck, because after jumping out of that trailer and pacing around sorta semi hysterical, muttering under my breath for a while, I noticed that the tractor was parked astride a sharp hump in the pavement. The hump was there to channel rain water, run-off from the hills behind that warehouse. It occurred to me that if the tractor could pull forward a foot or two, with the rear tires ON that hump I’d have a down hill run inside the trailer. That would help a lot in moving 125 cans of heavy stuff toward the back. Then, my plan continued, license or no license, I’d be using

that fork lift. If he fired me, Garrett would be finishing the job himself.

So, I went inside and found the tractor driver. He was leaning into a service window, flirting with the, semi-ugly, badly dressed and overly made-up, bleached-blond secretary. I waited and waited, while those two carried on like pigeons, and eventually I kinda came up beside him and poked him on the shoulder. He jumped like it might have been his wife.

“What the f’k?”

“Are you the truck driver?”

“Yes, I’m the ‘kin’ truck driver, who the hell are you.”

“I’m the warehouse guy.”

He looked at me askance. He snorted. “You’re the warehouseman?” he laughed. “You don’t look like a ‘kin’ warehouseman, you look like a ‘kin’ hippie.”

“Yeah, well, that aside, could I get you to move your truck?”

“Move my truck?” He laughed at the uniqueness of the situation. “Kid who looks like a ‘kin’ hippie wants me to move my truck.” He shook his head in disbelief, took off his baseball cap and scratched his short-cropped skull.

“Just about a foot.”

This was funnier still. He laughed derisively and spoke to the secretary, “D’you hear that? This hippie wants me to move MY truck, one ‘kin’ foot.”

“It would help me a lot,” I said.

“Well, if it’ll help you a lot, then let’s go out and look at it,” he sighed and ambled out through the warehouse and climbed straight up into the cab and started it up.

When we met at the back of the truck he took off his cap and scratched his head again, “Now, what is it you want me to do?”

“Well, do you think you could stop with your rear tires on that hump?”

“What hump are you...?” he squatted and peered under the truck. He stood up. He looked at me. “Look,” he said, “I can do better than that. I’ll place the trailer right on that hump, so’s when I leave ‘er you’ll have the hump under ‘er. I gotta get my rig outta here tonight.”

The guy climbed up into his cab saying, “Let me know when you feel good about it.” I stood to the side and watched, while he maneuvered the truck. It took a lot more than I thought it would and when it was in place I realized that now I was six or eight feet further away from the warehouse than I had been before, but after all the guy had done for a ‘kin’ hippie I couldn’t say anything. He climbed down walked around and cranked the legs of the trailer down right in the middle of that hump. He unhooked a few hoses and plugs and chains and things, climbed back up into the cab and moved it out from under the trailer. Then he stopped, climbed down, and came back to give me instructions.

He wanted me to promise I’d level the trailer when I was done, and he showed me how to do it. It involved a big crank; it involved a huge steel pin. “After you’re done doin’ whatever it is you gotta do—I do not want to know about it. Some hippie ends up dead under a pile of red lead, I want nothin’ to do with it. So, after you’re done playing, I want you to level out that trailer, just like you seen me do

it. It'll be slow goin', but just take it easy and do it. You *don't* do that...next time we meet, we ain't gonna be friends no more."

He climbed back up into the cab one final time, sat there for a few minutes and then drove off slowly with clouds of black smoke belching out of the stacks on either side. When I looked into the trailer I noticed, with elation, that the cans had slid around inside the trailer with all the maneuvering of the truck, and a couple of them had even slid most of the 35 feet back to the tail. I found a 2X12 in the warehouse and used a circular saw inappropriately, without authorization, training, or license, to cut it to a good length to block the end of the trailer bed. Then, with a smile, filled with delight, awash in the warmth of my own intelligence, I climbed up into the trailer. Sliding the cans downhill on the steel rails that lined the bed of that trailer didn't go exactly as I'd imagined. They didn't slide willingly; they didn't slide like a mug of beer along a bar in a western movie, but, with insistence they moved, some more begrudgingly than others.

I'd started out bent nearly in half, placing my hands at the bottom of the can to set it in motion. But once there was room I discovered I could sit down and drive the can with both feet. That worked pretty well. Once in a while I had to stop in order to cuss and throw things of course, but, after I discovered one of the rails worked much better than the other I moved every single one of those cans down to the end of that trailer in about four hours—taking time to regain my breath, when necessary.

After I had them all at the end where I wanted them—about ten or twelve deep—I realized that I had, in the process, built myself in. I was a bit nervous about walking on the things—with that trailer running downhill—so I had to move some cans back—up hill this time—to form a pathway out. That took forever, but I was a happy kid when I jumped down from the back of that trailer and observed my good work. Because I thought it might be dangerous to have the cans remain on a downward slope while trying to off-load them, I went around and leveled the trailer, cranking down the legs like the truck driver showed me, and locked them into place with a big steel pin, as he'd asked me to. If ever we were to meet again, I wanted for us to still be friends.

Then I shut the doors on the trailer and went inside to proudly proclaim to Garret I'd had enough for the day. Sadly, I discovered that I was the only one in the place beside the semi-ugly, heavily made-up secretary and she was shrugging on her coat as if to abandon me there for the night.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were still out there. Did you close the warehouse door?" I went back in and dragged on the chain that lowered the warehouse door.

The next day I thought I'd gloat a little first and then go out and finish up the impossible task before gloating a little more. So, when I arrived I asked the secretary, "Is Mr. Garret in his office?"

"No, I don't think Garret's coming in today," she said.

"He's not?"

"I don't think so. I'll ask."

She disappeared into the inner offices and emerged saying. “No, they say he won’t be in till tomorrow.” So, I went out and started up the forklift.

I placed a pallet on the forks and I drove it carefully, my little heart aflutter, to the back of the truck. There, I shut it down while I opened the doors and climbed on the trailer. I threw the 2X12 to the ground and climbed down to move the fork lift closer. I shut it down again and climbed into the trailer. I loaded five cans onto that pallet, because I didn’t know how much the thing could take, and then I climbed down and started it up, lowered the load and carefully drove the pallet over to the corner of the warehouse, got down and off loaded the cans. After a few loads, it occurred to me that MAYBE I could off-load the cans at the front of the well-worn concrete warehouse floor, then—after accumulating a small herd of cans—just push them all across the floor into the corner using the forklift. I don’t remember why this pleased me so much or why, logically, it made any appreciable difference, but it worked and that’s the way I did it.

By late afternoon I had off-loaded 125 cans of red lead, single-handed, without any help, all by myself, alone, and, more importantly, with no one around to interfere with me or tell me otherwise. I parked my secret friend, the forklift and let down the warehouse door and went home early.

Did I expect congratulations? I guess I did. I played out several possible scenarios in my mind, all of them involving a humbled Mr. Garret, some with the president of the company, both mouths open, stunned, amazed. I guess I

supposed that my good hard work, my single-handed heroic efforts would get, at very least, the nod of acknowledgment if not outright approval. The next day when I arrived Garret told me to go out into the warehouse and he'd be with me in a minute. I went out and—not to be too obvious—sat comfortably on top of the cans of red lead, awaiting my reward. He showed up maybe an hour later with a cup of coffee in his hand, and stood off at a distance.

He extended his arm with a set of keys dangling from his fingers and said, "Go get the boss' Buick and bring it around back and wash it up good and give it a new coat of wax." I remained seated on the red lead and said nothing. "Did you hear me? I want you to go around front and get the boss' 'kin' car and bring it around here and wash it up and give it a 'kin' coat of wax."

He stood there holding the keys at arms length. I sat on the red lead, said nothing.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"Well..."

"I was hired to work in the warehouse."

"What are you telling me?"

"I guess I'm telling you that I was not hired to wash cars; this is not a car wash."

He stood there looking at me with the keys dangling from the end of his fingers. Then he bellowed, "Bobby!" There was no immediate response. JUNIOR!" he bellowed, and a dumpy kid about my age appeared from out of the offices. "Yeah?"



“Go get your father’s car and bring it around back and give it a good, thorough, washing and put a new coat of wax on it.”

Junior ran over, took the keys and ran out through the office door, pleased as punch.

Garret then turned to me. “OK, Mr. This-ain’t-no-’kin’-car-wash, here’s what I want *you* to do. Take that ’kin’ red lead you’re sittin’ on like some kind of ’kin’ princess, and move it over here.” He pointed to a spot about 12 feet away. “I want it ’kin’ right ’kin’ goddamned here.” He pointed with emphasis to the spot. He glared at me. “Get to work.”

I got up slowly and turned my back to him and stared at the 125 cans of red lead that needed to be moved 12 feet.

“Have fun,” he said, spat, and went back into the office.

I’d scooted maybe two of those cans and was struggling with the third—there may have been some verbal expression involved as well—when a tall skinny redneck in overalls came ambling up and said, “What are you doing there, Guitar?”

“Well, I gotta move these cans of red lead from over there to here.”

He snorted. “No you don’t. Who said you gotta do that?”

“Mr. Garret.”

“Well, did you tell Mr. Garret the secret word?”

“The secret word?”

“KISS MY ASS. That’s what you should have told him.

Let me help you put those cans back and we’ll see what we can do. No sense in making work when there is none.”

He helped me shove the cans back where they came from. Then he went out and climbed into a huge flatbed truck, laden with ropes and cables and buckets and ladders and catwalks hanging off of every surface, and he drove that truck into the warehouse and parked it over the precise spot where I was supposed to move the red lead.

“There you go, Guitar,” he said. “Newton’s third law: you can’t move red lead into a space already occupied by a work truck.” He winked at me, patted me on the shoulder and went into the offices.

I just stood there for a while then went out and helped Junior wash his father’s car. When my hero emerged he came up to me and said, “Tomorry you’ll be workin’ with us over at the plant. We’ll pick you up here at 6:30 AM.” He raised an eyebrow and squinted at me, as if to say, ‘Got it?’ “6:30,” he said.

Garret came out ten seconds later, looked at the truck, turned to me and said, “You might as well go home, you ain’t working in the ‘kin’ warehouse any longer.”

“But, I’m supposed to be here in the morning?”

“I guess if you’re working for someone else you better get that straight with them,” he said, spit on the floor, and went back into the office.

## **BILLY and KEN-TUCK**

The next day, at 6:30 AM I met with the guy who saved my life, Billy, and his partner, Ken-tuck at the warehouse. We all climbed into the truck that occupied the space that the red lead couldn't and drove over to a plant and through the plant to a mill where we—this team of three—were painting the structural steel that held the roof on 45 feet above our heads. Billy, '*as in Hill-Billy*', came from Tennessee and Ken-tuck, from 'guess where'. They showed me what I needed to do, to work below them, to keep them working above.

They worked on the 16 inch wide catwalk overhead, 35 feet in the air, spraying structural steel with grey paint. Below, I mixed paint, I poured paint, I ran equipment up and down on ropes, I cleaned spray guns, and kept the pumps working. What was nice about working for these two rednecks was that they didn't expect me to do anything that didn't need doing, and as long as the paint didn't run out, the pump was running, the needles in their guns were clean and the lines ran without kinks, they seemed absolutely delighted to have me working with them. They called me 'Guitar', "Cause you look lack you oughter be in some kinda gull-darned rock and roll band with all that hair." My third day working with these guys, they asked me if I would like to go above. And although I have been scared of heights my entire life, I liked these guys so much and wanted so badly to please them, that I said "Sure." The eagerness in my voice sounded foreign to my own ear. Who was this kid?

That's why I was standing on a catwalk, 35 feet in the air working on my spray pattern when a pickup truck came speeding into the building below, horn blaring. Billy stopped his technique lesson and looked down. I looked down and almost fell. Below a couple of guys jumped from the truck and ran over to Ken-tuck and he looked up at us and hollered, "Shut it down! SHUT it DOWN."

"Why? What's happening?"

"Kerik is folding," they shouted.

We let down our equipment with ropes, tied off the cat walks, made our way down to the mill floor and piled into our trucks and sped off back to the warehouse. One of the informants rode with us and on the way there explained that he'd seen some tax people go into the offices, along with Kerik accountants and lawyers and they had emerged a few minutes later, and the gist of what they had been saying was that Kerik would be paying off all the big guys they owed money to first.

When we arrived out front, there were pickup trucks all over the place and good honest, trusting, salt of the earth, hardworking fellows gathering in clumps and talking animatedly. Billy told the guy who rode with us to go over and sit on the boss' Buick and to not let ANYONE drive off with it. Then he went to his own truck in the parking lot and leaned in and took something from the glove compartment and shoved it inside his overalls under his belt. Then Billy and Ken-tuck and Guitar went right into the office.

The secretary seemed surprised to see us.

"What's this we hear about Kerik folding?"

“Oh, that’s just...” she looked around behind herself, nodded ‘Yes’ emphatically and continued loudly, “That’s just a rumor.”

“Well,” said Billy, “We’d like to get paid.”

Right then a guy in an ill-fitting suit with a huge pot belly emerged from the inner offices and demanded, “What’s going on out here! I thought I told you to lock that door.”

“We’d like to get paid,” said Billy.

“Don’t you worry,” said the pregnant fellow, “everybody’s going to get paid.”

“We want paid right now.”

“You’ll be paid on the 15<sup>th</sup> just like always,” he said calmly.

“We want paid now,” said Ken-tuck moving forward in a threatening manner.

The guy in the suit eyed him for a bit then said, “OK. I’ll go in and write you guys a check right now.” He asked the secretary in a courteous whisper to go over and lock the front door and she did that while he backed smilingly into the offices.

Ken-tuck sat on the secretary’s desk and I sat down in one of the chairs reserved for clients, and Billy paced around in front of the door the guy had disappeared into.

After what felt like a very long time the guy emerged with two checks and gave them to Billy and Ken-tuck.

“Here you go, fellahs; everything we owe you.”

“Guitar too,” said Billy.

“What? I’m afraid I’m not sure I und...”

“Guitar,” said Billy, pointing to me. “He’s gonna want to be paid today too.”

“Oh. OK,” said the guy, “I see no reason why we can’t do that,” he said and slipped back into the offices.

Garret eventually appeared out of those offices, eyed us critically, spit on the carpet, and walked out through another door.

When the pregnant guy came out again he handed me a check. But when he started to go back into the office, Ken-tuck blocked the door.

"Now," said Billy, standing up and walking over to the man, "You're gonna cash 'em."

"Now, boys, there's no reason for that. Just take your checks to the bank in the morning and they'll be glad to cash them for you."

Billy looked at the guy; the guy looked at him. Ken-tuck stood there with his arm across the door, blocking his retreat.

"These checks are perfectly good. I assure you."

Billy reached inside his overalls and revealed something to the guy. Only later did I learn it was the handle of a gun.

The guy in the suit, borrowed a pen from the secretary, asked us each to sign the back of our check, and went back into the offices. Shortly after Junior emerged and leaned up against a wall, with his hands behind his back, and stared at us. After several minutes of loud voices from within, the guy came out again, said, "There's really no need for this," and counted out what was due to each of us, in cash, on the secretary's desk.

"Lock that door again after they leave," he instructed someone and stormed back into the inner offices.

We went outside and everybody in the parking lot looked to us. They wanted answers. They wanted to know what went on in there. We said nothing. Ken-tuck made a gesture

declaring, *It's every man for himself, boys.* Billy said to me, "Get your car, Guitar, and folly us, we gonna go spend some of this money while IT'S still good."

My father told me that after the liberation of Paris the soldiers of his division were each given, in turn, a day off, to go into town and try to forget about things for a brief moment. When it was his turn my father went into the city and found a little bistro and walked straight up to the bar and ordered a beer. When the beer was placed before him he placed a single note on the counter. It was the smallest thing he had, the only thing he had, the equivalent of about one month's pay. The French gentleman behind the bar made much of the fact that it was a big note, gesticulating wildly, rolling his eyes heavenward for help, and opening the till to reveal its lamentable emptiness. My father demonstrated that it was the only thing he had. So, the barkeep shrugged and, making a gesture suggesting that he might find change in the back room, took the note and disappeared behind some curtains.

After finishing his beer my father spoke to the guy behind the counter in his best French, asking for his change. Oh, but, he was sorry, this French gentleman, but he did not understand what the good American soldier was trying to say. Did he want another beer? Non? Well what could it be then? What could he possibly want? My father, first in French and then in English, asked once again politely for the change. Oh, but, he did not understand, this poor French fellow; after all, unfortunately, he did not speak English. He was sorry. Regret was written deeply upon his sincerely furled face. He was very sorry, but he could not even guess

what this American soldier was trying to communicate. Perhaps it was one of those small mysteries that must, alas, remain a mystery.

My father, having just been through four months of unrelenting Hell, happened to be wearing a side arm at the time, a 45 automatic. So, “just to clarify things” he thought he would take his side arm and lay it *gently* on the bar...a mere suggestion. Of course, whatever your intentions, two pounds of cold steel hitting a wooden countertop can make what my father called “a substantial clunk”—Clack!, as the French might say—and it raised a few eyebrows.

Suddenly the place went dead silent. As suddenly the barkeep remembered that Monsieur had not yet received his change. Oh la-la la-la! How could he have forgotten? He ran through the curtains and, returning as quickly as he departed, laid the change nicely upon the counter. The poor French man could not understand my father’s French and, unfortunately, he did not understand any English, but that handgun spoke a language he understood perfectly.

My father was 19 years old at the time, about the same age I was when Billy’s handgun spoke on my behalf.



## THE LANGUAGE OF WORK

After the showdown at Keric Construction, my father pulled a few more strings and got me a job in a “mill”, a cement plant. One Sunday afternoon I was out in the front yard trying to get the goddamned lawn mower to start, and after many, many, many, frustrating attempts I wound up and kicked the damned thing saying, START you goddamned ’kin’ piece of ’kin’ junk!” My mother, who had sneakily snuck (or maybe snuck sneakily) outside to quietly admire her college-student son as he relived the near-endless joys of lawn maintenance, was standing behind me, with a glass of lemonade in hand, when I exploded. Of course, quite properly, she was shocked. Apparently, she’d never before heard anyone utter that ’kin’ word. As I recall it she was genuinely embarrassed and seriously angry with me. In fact, she was angrier than I’d ever seen her before. “I don’t want you using *that word* around *this house*. You shouldn’t be using *that word* anywhere, ever. It’s unacceptable; completely unacceptable. Where on earth did you learn *that word* anyway?”

Of course it was impossible for me to tell my mother the truth. And, I didn’t think it was important for her to know that I’d learned it in the mills, or that every ’kin’ man in that ’kin’ place, from the ’kin’ president down to the lowest ’kin’ laborer made prolific ’kin’ use of that ’kin’ word; or that closely associated phrases of every creative ’kin’ possibility spewed forth from every ’kin’ mouth every ’kin’ moment of every ’kin’ day. I’m sure that over the many years my father’d been working in and around the mills no one had ever uttered that word in my mother’s presence, but, actually working *in* that ’kin’ mill was

another 'kin' matter. It was almost a 'kin' requirement for the 'kin' job.

“Hey! Didn’t I 'kin' tell you to take that 'kin' jackhammer down to mill yard Three?”

“I’m still 'kin' workin’ on this 'kin' pile of 'kin' slag.”

“Well, get it 'kin' done! I see you 'kin' standin’ around here pickin’ your 'kin' nose instead-uh 'kin' getting the 'kin' work done. What do you think we’re 'kin' doing here, playing patty-cake? Take that 'kin' jackhammer down to Three, then come back here and finish levelin’ this 'kin' pile of 'kin' shit. Goddamned 'kin' useless, no-good, stupid 'kin' sons of...”

That was the level of courtesy I was used to in the plant. I was just a 'kin' college student trying to put together enough 'kin' money during the 'kin' summer to stay in 'kin' school.

On my father’s level—much higher up the ladder— it went more like this:

“Come in. Have a seat. Speak to me...”

“We got another 'kin' problem at the goddamned Bahama site.”

“You want somethin’ to drink? What’s the 'kin' problem?”

“No. Thanks. That goddamned shipping company that brought in the 'kin' mill framing now claims that their 'kin' ship suffered some kind of 'kin' damage at our goddamned dockside.”

“What the nature of the 'kin' damage?”

“They say our goddamned pier caught onto one of the ship’s 'kin' strakes and pulled it free.”

“For Christ’s sake. We’ve had other ’kin’ ships in that goddamned harbor haven’t we?”

“Yeah, and we’ve taken ’kin’ depth and ’kin’ displacement figures and there’s really no goddamned way our goddamned pier caused that goddamned damage to that ’kin’ strake.”

“Alright, alright. Get me the goddamned particulars and I’ll see if our goddamned insurance guys can put an end to this ’kin’ bullshit. For Christ’s sake, it’s always the same goddamned thing isn’t it? Anything else?”

“Well, I’ll probably have to see you again soon about that ’kin’ siding for the goddamned freight cars—but that can wait.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, I thought that was ’kin’ settled.”

Until I worked in the ’kin’ mill, I never used any of that ’kin’ language, ever. Never. It wouldn’t have crossed my ’kin’ mind. Before I spent a summer in the ’kin’ mill I thought people who used such language were stupid and vulgar. After having worked a summer in the mill of course, I knew goddamned ’kin’ well they were. But, I also understood why.

My father and I may have been the only guys in that plant who did not speak like that as a matter of course; we were also the only guys who did not smoke or drink ourselves into oblivion nightly, but, we both truly TRULY understood how cussin’ smokin’ and drinkin’ might become an almost necessary part of a mill workers’ life. In some ways it was a matter of ’kin’ survival.

Let me tell you something. As low man on the totem pole I spent an entire week down in a hole shoveling molten slag into a grated chute. My feet were shod in steel-toed boots; my hands were in heavy, insulated work gloves; because the roar of the mill had been long-ago proven to be literally deafening, I wore ear plugs; I wore a respirator and protective goggles and a hard hat on my head...all required equipment. Over my jeans and work shirt I wore full-coverage heat repellent overalls. I was down in a 6 foot by 6 foot hole, 16 feet below the floor of the mill, with a shovel, shoveling hot slag—which weighed maybe 35 pounds per shovelful—into a grate. I was down there with every sense—sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing—stifled, protected, deadened, shoveling heavy, red hot powder as fast as I could for four straight hours at a time. It was my own personal private Hell.

After four hours I could, legally, take a break if I wanted to, but, as I learned on that first day, if I took a break while the mill above was still turning (and I think I'm right in saying that it turned 24 hours a day), when I crawled back down into that hole the slag would have accumulated enough to virtually nullify everything I'd done the previous four hours. I couldn't understand how such working conditions could exist in America or how I—a middle class white college kid—could find myself down there struggling in that heat, that noise for a four hour stint without relief. As someone with the mind of a domesticated turtle I also couldn't understand why that work needed doing at all. What was the source of this endless goddamned spillage? WHY, for gods-sake didn't they either fix it or, if they

couldn't fix it, put some kind of machine down in that god forsaken Hellhole to move that hot slag along?

I learned three things in that situation. One—confronted with a seemingly endless, self-perpetuating, goddamned horrible situation, you have to pace yourself. Two—if, while in such a situation, you stop for even one second and leaned on your shovel, a millwright will appear almost instantly overhead and signal you to get the f'k back to work. Three—no combination of pleading, screaming, crying or praying, accomplishes anything. I tried them all. On the other hand, anger really seemed to help. Cussing worked wonders. Slamming things around helped too (though it was too confining down there to do all the damage I would have liked.)

In that situation, bitterness was the key to survival.

In those days, I didn't have a lot of it to draw upon, but I drained myself of every drop of frustration and disappointment I could find within, and made it that way through the summer.

## **THE CORNERSTONE OF MY THINKING ON RELIGION**

I went back to college in Richmond, Virginia, my sophomore year, in my own car. It was an old Peugeot which my father helped me select. He crawled underneath it, poked around under the hood, removed a spark plug or two, grabbed a wheel and tried to wobble it, drove it up a hill in the wrong gear, drove it down the other side in the wrong gear (all on purpose), ran his finger inside the exhaust pipe, looked underneath it for a second time, opened the hood up after our excursion and asked to see the spot where it was usually parked. After all of that was over he declared it basically sound.

In fact, it was wonderful. It was unassuming, to say the least. It was, above all else, mine. Green and mine; rusted in spots and mine; old and smelly and mine. It wasn't lovely to look at and it wasn't perfectly dependable, but it was mine. You know, some very good cars have springs coming through the driver's side seat. And you have to admit that some extremely amenable cars can develop slight oil leaks. I'd purchased this car myself with money that I'd earned working that summer in the goddamned mills. No one had ever been prouder than I was of that neat old car. Oh, and it had a sunroof. In those days nobody had a sunroof. My old Peugeot had a sunroof.

"What's that hole in the roof for?"

"It's a sunroof."

"A what?"

"A sunroof."

"What the heck is a sunroof?"

“Well, you know, like on a sunny...”

“I bet it leaks.”

I was especially fond of the lion rampant cast in lexan in the center of the yellowed and crackle-infested steering wheel. He was silver, balanced forever on his sinister leg, the other leg kicking like a Rockette, forelegs and claws striking out wildly at some unseen pest (a gnat, a fly); I liked the playfulness of this regal dancing beast. He has a long flickering tongue and eyes a-blaze.



In those days, in the beginning, I parked this wonderful little vehicle alongside the park whenever I could, so I could look down upon it day or night, from my place above the Laundro-Mat where I lived, and say to myself, “That’s my car, by god.” Of course any student who had a car thought he had a better car than mine, but nobody on earth had a better car than my old Peugeot. That really was a pretty neat car. That was forty years ago and when I think of that car a smile comes to my face; when I see one in an old French movie a bolt of delight runs through me. I know what they smell like. I know how they handle. I know the peculiarities of three speeds on the column shifting. I

remember it all with a happy smugness. That's about as much as anyone can ask from a car, I think.

Joanie and I drove everywhere in that car; putted around town and out into the countryside. On school breaks we would chose between Pittsburgh, where my parents lived, or Charlotte, where her parents lived, and we drove there. My Peugeot got something like 38 or 40 MPG in the city and 48 on the highway and the very best gas was 27 cents a gallon and you could get the unmarked stuff for 19 cents. In those days I was making almost—not quite, almost—\$4/hour working in the school cafeteria, and that could buy you a lot of gas. It was wonderful to be able to fill-up and get out of town; a miracle of liberty. During one break we drove down to Charlotte first and then all the way back up to Pittsburgh. So that you are properly impressed I must tell you that's a distance of 87,423 lunar miles. We did it in one sitting; average speed 47 MPH. The springs were coming through the seats for most of that trip, but we were happy. I loved Joanie, she loved me and we both held a tremendous fondness in our hearts for that car.

My mother didn't really trust that car and she was always glad/relieved/exhausted/worn out/delighted/thankful to see us pull into their driveway even when it wasn't snowing. Joanie's folks didn't trust either me or that car and they were always glad to see their daughter arrive home in one piece, as it were.

So with that in place, here's a charming little tale entitled,  
*Yet Another Lovely Spring Outing near Richmond,  
Virginia, Heart of the Confederacy, 1968.*



SCENE: Springtime. Richmond, Virginia. Two young lovers, side by side, going out into the country for a little ride in a nifty old car. What could be nicer? Nothing, you say. Precisely. You understand completely and that makes my task so much easier. So far we have Spring, Love, a little ride out in the countryside.

Joanie was snuggling beside me as we wound away from the city. She had both arms entwined in mine. She had her lovely little face pressed warmly, adoringly against my shoulder—my arm was taking the brunt of her affection on that Spring day. We were both filled to the brim and overflowing with the very goodness of Life; it was in us like a rhythm. We were smiling. We were probably giggling with delight. Who wouldn't be? As we drove by, the pasture on either side of us rolled away smoothly, quietly, taking cattle and trees along with it without resistance. The road was a gentle roller coaster under the warm, softening tires of my old car. Windows open. Gentle breeze. Clouds, birds, stream running along beside us for a bit before swerving off into the distance and disappearing between two lush green perky hills...that sort of thing. It's a pretty picture. Your quick understanding helps.

We are the only ones on that road. It's me and her and everything in nature that counts as good. A pickup truck passes by. I hardly notice it; I'm in love. She doesn't really notice, she's a young lady—a true southern belle, gentle, soft spoken, and uncommon lovely—and they don't notice such details. Young women don't notice pick-up trucks with shotgun racks and leering rednecks. The truck slides

up over the top of a rise and around the curve, out of sight ahead of us. They have no part in our little world.

When we round that curve however I can see that same truck stopped up ahead. It's in the very middle of the road. I slow down as we approach it. This is unusual, I think. What on earth would a pick-up truck full of leering rednecks be doing stopped in the middle—right smack dab in the middle—of a country road?

“Do you think they're OK?” she asks. “Maybe we should stop and ask if they need help,” she says.

I slow down to a crawl. This ain't right and my instincts are telling me so. My instincts are screaming at me. This ain't right, this ain't right. I notice that the driver of the truck is turned around in the seat, one arm thrown over the seatback, grinning at us. The guy in the passenger seat is doing the same. They're leering like unshaven jack-o-lanterns. Between these two is a baby seat with a child in it. She squirming, craning to see. The driver continues to stare at us as we roll slowly toward them. He unconsciously reaches over and pats the little child on the head. By this time we are maybe a dozen feet from them and I have come to a complete stop. Something is very seriously wrong here. I don't know what it is, but something is not right.

Joanie is sitting bolt upright, “Do you think they need help?” I can tell by the break in her voice that she's hoping that's the case; she's hoping the matter's as simple as that. The driver turns away for a second, and now his truck is coming at us in reverse. I can hear it whining as he accelerates. He's climbing on the accelerator. The truck is

barreling toward us; it's fishtailing wildly. Both of these men are grinning at us as the truck slams into the front of my car.

"Oh my God," screams Joanie. She can't believe this is happening.

The truck pulls forward again and suddenly he's coming at us again in reverse.

My trusty old Peugeot has conked out from the impact. I'm telling Joanie to brace herself for the next hit. Meanwhile I'm frantically trying to get the engine of my little car to turn over. Seconds before he hits us again it starts. The collision takes place just as I throw it in reverse. Now, I'm driving as quickly as I can away from him in reverse. The impact has the truck bouncing. I continue to back up as quickly as my old car can go. Joanie is in tears, crying, "Oh God. Oh God. Dear God."

We've managed to put about 30 feet between us and them, when the Peugeot conks out again. As I frantically get it started I'm keeping my eye on them, The driver of the truck ruffles the hair of the child, reaches up and takes a shotgun down from the rack that hangs above the child's head. The passenger and the driver both get out of the truck; they're laughing as they pick up parts of my car—pieces of grill and trim from the headlights. They hold them up jokingly, victorious, and toss them into the back of their truck. Then the driver points the shotgun at us, and peering down its barrel he begins slowly walking toward us.

I am praying as loudly and as quickly as any reprobate has ever prayed, "Dear God, help us. Dear God, help us. Dear God, please help us."

And God does help us.

The redneck moron bastard father idiot lowers his shot gun, laughs, spits in my direction (this is a male thing), goes back to the cab, replaces his shotgun on the rack. His door closes—clunk. His buddy stares at us for a bit longer, then gets in the other side. His door closes—clunk. They drive off, with the child between them looking back at us. What could be nicer than a little ride in the country around Richmond in the Spring?

For several months I refused to leave my loft, except to go to school and I sat up nights keeping an eye on my car from my window. I was convinced that anyone crazy enough to attack us like that was crazy enough to come into town looking for us—or they might stumble across my car while driving through town, and new visions of glorious violence would open up before their eyes.

Here's irony or something...an historical note at any rate. About three weeks after this event took place, a movie called *Easy Rider* came out and EVERYONE who knew me went out of their way to caution me NOT to see that film. I took their advice. But, I guessed that my redneck friends in the pick-up truck probably liked that film a great deal. *Their friends* probably urged them to go see it, sayin', "YEW GOTTA go see that flick, Beau! I think you'll be able to relate pretty strongly to the antagonist."

I'll tell you what I honestly believe.

I don't think God stepped in to save our lives that day. I think God stepped in to save the life of the lovely young woman beside me. I was just in the right place to be saved along with her.

Ever since then I have made a point of seeking out, latching onto, and, if not always remaining strictly devoted, at least remaining close to the finest, purest and most wonderful women on earth. And, that has really worked out pretty well. I now have the best wife any man has ever had—perhaps in the entire history of marriage—and, I'm as happy as a man of my peculiar temperament can possibly be.

So, for me, it's been a blessing. Those idiots in that pick-up truck did me a favor.

## **BURGER STAND BAPTISM**

After our redneck encounter in the Virginia countryside I'd barricaded myself inside my studio. I hadn't budged for months. My friends, Rick and Ginger, eventually coaxed me outside and convinced me to go with them to a drive-in. It would be a short jaunt and we'd have a good time and, by this method, I would have broken the dark spell my shotgun totin' friends had cast upon poor little over-sensitive me. The clouds, it was said, would be driven away by burgers and the sun would once again shine down upon me like golden fries.

So, with Rick driving and Ginger up front, I cowered like a coward in the back seat. When we pulled into the gravel parking lot of this hamburger stand all my reasonable fears were overthrown by the spirit of the moment. Possessed completely by who knows what inspiration (I like malts), I boldly announced, "You guys just stay in the car, I'll be right back."

While walking toward the stand I was busy going over the order in my head. I got in line behind a short fat girl. Once her order was placed, she stepped over to the pick-up window and waited. I took a deep breath and stepped forward. This would be my first dealings with redneck society in months, and I was a little nervous. I smiled and began rattling off the list of things we wanted to the girl behind the window. When I looked up I saw that she was not taking it down; she was not marking anything on her little pad; she was just staring at me, unblinking. And although this may sound like a highly innovative approach to expressing hatred, it is actually the traditional approach

in the South; I'd experienced it many times before during my short, pleasant stay in Richmond.

Quickly now, here's a list of the places where I had received that same treatment: The Plantation Room, Morton's Tea Room, Ilene's, and that little restaurant directly across from the Village, the name of which I can not recall, not to mention cities: Saint Louis, Mo., Salt Lake City, Flagstaff, AZ, and the entire State of Texas. Though in fairness I must say that the Plantation Room served me when I showed up one evening with a little black kid in tow; Morton's Tea Room surrendered and served us after a tall skinny homosexual named Terri shattered the long-hair barrier there (they didn't realize he was a male until they'd already served him), and the place across the street from the Village eventually discovered that our money could be deposited along with that of their bristle headed customers and no one would even have to know.

Meanwhile, back at the ol' drive-in, I said, "I'd like to order..." This time the lovely creature behind the glass squinted at me, pursed her lips as a sign of disgust and slammed the pencil down on the countertop. She was refusing to hold any implement which might aid in feeding the likes of me. She did not turn her back on me however. Instead, she leaned on the counter and squinted at me through the glass in some kind of porcine challenge. Frankly, I didn't expect it; even less did I know how to respond. She broke her stare long enough to deliver food to the pick-up window and say cheerily, to another customer, "Thank you kindly. Y'all come again." Then, she returned to stand in front of me sour faced and, again, unblinking.

Meanwhile, someone had come up behind me and the cook came charging out from behind the grill, leaned toward the window and snapped, “Will you step aside so *people* can order?” I was confused—mainly because for a very long time I had been convinced that I was people. “YOU,” he said pointing at me, “Step aside so PEOPLE can order.”

I went back to the car and crawled in back, defeated, and by that I mean, thoroughly shaken. I stammered, “They won’t take our order.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know. They refused to take our order.”

“What happened?”

“The girl just stared at me. Then some big, redneck chef-guy told me to step aside so that ‘people’ can order. They’re not going to serve us. OK? Let’s just go.” For me the social experiment was over; I was frightened and anxious to get out of there.

“This is ridiculous!” declared Rick boldly. He got out of the car and strode across the parking lot and got in line. He’d been raised in the striving/thriving middle-class of Maryland and since early childhood had been convinced that he was people too.

While waiting in line, he kept turning around and miming various things to us with broad joyous gestures. It was all a joke. He’d take care of it. I always admired how comfortable Rick felt moving around in the world. “Don’t worry,” said Ginger throwing one arm over the seatback to comfort me, “we’ll be chompin’ on cheeseburgers in no time.”



When Rick stepped up to the window, we could see that something was happening, though we could not tell quite what. It didn't appear normal though. Then suddenly the girl behind the window lunged forward like a vicious dog, and Rick jumped back. She was immediately joined by the cook. He was bent over the counter so far that his head was lodged in the slot where customers passed their money through. Red-faced, he was yelling at Rick.

Rick came running back to the car, got in, and was beginning to explain what had happened, while we rolled up the windows and locked the doors. Soon, we were surrounded with rednecks and the car began to rock from side to side. While the males were busy rocking the car, the females were standing around behind them, picking their noses and looking appropriately vacant. Ginger, who'd been born and raised in the mountains of Ol' Virginie, expressed serious concerns when one of these gentlemen started pissing on her side of the vehicle. Rick found that so unbelievable that, for scientific reasons I guess, he crawled across the seat to confirm it for himself. At the moment I didn't have time to think about it, but later I wondered about anyone so full of venom that he could piss at will. At the moment fear was having that same effect on me.

By the time Rick got the engine started our new friends had achieved synchronization and the car was rocking pretty seriously. Ginger was bracing herself for the moment it rolled over completely. I was shouting at Rick to drive the goddamned car and get us out of there. Rick put it in gear and we started moving slowly through the crowd. 'Run 'em over! Get us out of here!'" I was yelling. They were

pounding on the hood and the roof, and there was a lot of shouting (nothing memorable, nothing clever, nothing either pithy or Shakespearian), and, as we drove off, random handy items were thrown at us, small rocks, beer cans (empty), paper milk shake containers (half full). I didn't look back. I was, once again, cowering in the back as we drove along in complete silence.

All in all it had been a pleasant little outing and it drove home the fact that we were not entirely and perfectly welcome guests in the still smoldering Capitol of the living-dead Confederacy. I believe that from that point on I almost never left the Fan District except, as said, to go very far away, and as quickly as possible.

## **The KNOWN ‘N’ UNKNOWN**

(Two eyes, an ear, and The Nose from the East)

I think it was Margaret Fields who had established an organic bakery in Santa Cruz, and word was that if we showed up there, she would put us up and feed us for as long as we cared to stay. Rick wanted to stay maybe a week and then head on back to college, Ginger wanted to stay as long as we could and I wanted to get there in time to take the very next flight out. I was anxious to get back to my girlfriend in time for Christmas.

Leaving Provincetown, we had gone about a hundred miles when we picked up a young chick hitchhiking. I got out and climbed into the back with Ginger, surrendering the highly coveted front passenger seat—as was usual for us—to our guest. She was a lovely little creature with big bright eyes and tons of heavy knotted hair and clothed in glorious patched denim from head to toe (it was a royal garment on her).

We’d gone maybe ten miles before Rick asked her where she was heading. I don’t know why it didn’t come out earlier—usually when you pick up a hitchhiker it’s the first thing you ask. Somehow we hadn’t. When she said, P’Town, Rick pulled over quickly and very kindly and patiently explained that she had been standing on the wrong side of the road, thumbing in the wrong direction.

“How long have you been waiting for a ride?”

“Man, it’s been like, I don’t know, a long time,” she said dreamily, scrunching up her pretty little face and letting her mind drift toward heaven.

Ginger sighed saying sarcastically to me, "It's not easy getting a car load of psychotics to San Francisco." Rick turned around and said cheerfully, "But, we all manage to get there!" The chick chirped up and said excitedly, "Oh, are you guys headin' out to San Fran? I'd like to go to San Fran," she said.

"What about Provincetown?"

"I'd rather go to San Fran," she said wrapping her skinny little arms around her knees and pouting. (It made me cringe every time she said San Fran, but that was the *only* thing I didn't like about her.)

When it came to introductions, she first told us her name was Un Oeil. I thought she said *Annoy*, and apparently Ginger did too because she said to me, "I can believe it." "It's French; my parents are French," said the little chick proudly. It means eyes," At that point Ginger rolled hers and I raised the hair that overhangs mine in an exaggerated manner. Eyes?

"It's actually *an* eye; one eye," said Rick, knowledgeable, well-read world traveler that he was, "Eyes, both eyes, would be Les Yeux"

"OH," said the chick with sudden inspiration, "I meant Oreille."

"Ear," said Rick quietly to the rest of us.

"Your name is Oreille?" asked Ginger, and the chick nodded affirmatively.

"It's French."

"Yes, we know," said Ginger, "Your parents are French."

"How did you know?" asked Oreille completely astonished.

"You have a truly receptive nature," she said turning in her

seat and smiling at Ginger. “I thought I could feel the vibe of a truly receptive nature in this car when I got in.”

Rick took an immediate liking to Oreille; Ginger took an immediate disliking to her, and I liked the way she looked. In all honesty, I never heard a word out of her sweet mouth. I’m one of those people that when my eyes are fully engaged, all my other senses are muted. And Oreille was a pleasure to look at. Later, Rick said that he thought that word also meant pillow, and that made a kind of tremendous sense to me.

When we were pulling into Pittsburgh, where my parents would feed us and we were assured a good night’s rest, Oreille decided she would continue on alone. She climbed out, stuck out her thumb, and we watched as the very first car pulled up behind us—a Dodge Dart. When they scooted past—she was already busy in conversation. Though we wished her luck, I think we were all fairly convinced that she didn’t need it. There are those dwelling among us whose innocence and, in some cases pure stupidity, seems to carry them through the twists and turns of this rocky life unscathed.

When we finally got to Santa Cruz, maybe three days later, there was an organic bakery at that location, precisely as we’d expected it, but no Margaret, and nobody there seemed to be able to recall ever having heard of her. The name was foreign to them. But, after all we were asking about events from the long-long-distant past—maybe as much as a year earlier—when she had founded the place.

In a small room attached to the bakery sat a young woman reading tarot. A large, bright yellow, wooden sign outside the doorway said “From *The East*. La Nez, KNOWS ALL, Sees All. Palm, Tarot, Phrenological Explorations ” When she looked up in my direction I recognized Oreille. She had her head wrapped in a kerchief with protozoa swimming around on it, but it was her. My heart leapt. While Rick diplomatically grilled the airheads behind the counter about Margaret, Ginger was looking over the freshly over-baked, leaden, organic goods, and I was leaning against the wall near Oreille’s cubby beaming waves of admiration in her direction. Eventually—that having failed—I went in hesitantly and said, “How much do you charge?” She didn’t seem to recognize me.

“It depends on how deep the reading.”

“How much for a shallow reading?” I asked, “Just the surface...” but she did not smile.

“I’ll tell you something for free,” she said looking me right in the eye.

“OK,” I said.

“You’ll never get where you’re going if you’re heading in the wrong direction.”

“So, you recognize us?”

“Of course,” she chirped, “Let me look at your palm.”

I extended my palm and Oreille traced a few lines delicately with the tip of her lovely little finger. “You will have three great loves in your life. One of them is in your life right now. The third great love in your life will last an eternity,” she shrugged and winked. “Don’t pout,” she said, “it’s a GOOD eternity, not a bad one.”

“Really?”

“Yup. She is your destiny.”

“And what about the second great love of my life?”

“She will come to realize her true path and will follow it away from you.”

“Really? And then what?”

“She’ll be married within a month,” she said jokingly.

“Looks like you’re going to be having a good time with many people coming and going in your life. There will be one false start; someone else will look like your great love but it will not last. Be patient. I see turbulence. Have faith in the flow of the Great River of Life.”

“You see all of that in the palm of my hand?”

“Oh, I see more than that. Much more. But, it’ll cost you.” She beamed at me proudly.

At that point Rick came up and Oreille got up and ran to him and threw herself into Rick’s arms and squealed, “Rick!” When Ginger appeared carrying two loaves of burnt bread, she threw herself into Ginger’s arms—though Ginger was a little less responsive—and cooed, “Ginger, my very dear friend. You must have sensed that I was here.”

While the love-fest between great, dear, long-lost friends continued, I went out to mope on the wooden steps that lead up to the bakery. Inside, they reconnected, chattering amiably, joyfully, and maybe a bit too loudly, behind my bruised back. Outside, I took in the blistering sun. “From The East,” I muttered. Ginger, filled with a wisdom of her own, came out, sat down beside me, patted me on the knee and said, “Cobbler, heel thyself.”

In those days such statements made perfect sense.

I accepted her good advice and was instantly re-healed.

## AMOS

Richmond missed having a white Christmas that year by ten days. The snow came early in January in the middle of the night. I was up there on the third floor, above the Laundro-Mat, painting as usual. I was probably sitting on a stool that I'd bought specifically for sitting and staring. It was one of the very few things I'd spent money on besides paint and canvas. I figured it was worth the cost because sitting and staring IS a crucial part of painting. This is the process as I know it. You sit, you stare, you discover the things that aren't quite right. You sit, you stare, you come up with solutions. I would say for every brief moment a brush travels the surface of the canvas there is an hour or more during which the serious painter is sitting and staring at what he's done. He's calculating what needs to be done and how it should be done and nodding in complete agreement with himself or shaking his head in utter disgust at his own shameful inability. Yes, there's some talking to himself, but it's usually good-natured. That's the process as I understand it. Naturally, there is a lot of time spent knowing something ain't right but not knowing exactly what, and knowing even less how to correct it. Inevitably, if you're persistent, the gut feeling that you are very very close surfaces. Sitting and staring at this point in the process is so important that it CAN NOT...or maybe it could...but, enough...

On that night, I was propped up on the stool, listening to a Charles Aznavour record and staring at my miserable work, when a voice came to me. The voice whispered something which I could not hear. When it spoke again, I got up and lifted the tone arm off the record, turned off the record



player, in order to more readily hear what was being said. As I stood there, head cocked, waiting, I became aware of the abnormal silence.

I'd lived in that place for more than a year and I knew the sounds of night in that neighborhood. But that night, at that moment, when I heard a car go by, my interest was piqued. It didn't have the normal, car in the night on Harrison Street, sound. What got me was the fact that I could actually hear the windshield wipers three floors below. *Zhoomp-plomp zhoomp-plomp*. It was almost as if I were sitting inside that car. That was most peculiar.

From the balcony across the hall I discovered that the world below—the park, the street, the lights, the buildings—had all been transformed. The entire area was covered in fresh-fallen snow. It was still falling. It was beautiful. The tracks which that single passing car had left were quickly being filled in with fresh fluffy snowfall. I leaned out and caught a few flakes. I'd had no idea this had been happening. It was wonderful to see the grass, the trees, the brick sidewalk, the lampposts, the benches, the soldier, all wrapped in a moonlit blanket of white. I stood out there, freezing and full of delight.

Then, below, a dog appeared, silent in the middle of the street. He was running and burying his snout in the snow and bounding crazily about. Then another dog appeared, and a third. They were invigorated by this stuff; leaping and snapping and prancing around proudly in it. One rolled in it, then got up to shake it off before launching himself into the air to snap at the falling flakes. Soon there were

maybe six dogs of various shapes and sizes gallivanting in the snow, and a man in a dark overcoat, bent over a walking stick, came trudging slowly behind. He, like the dogs, was walking up the very middle of the street. Freshly fallen snow cancels all normalcy.

Though he followed the pack, this man was clearly their leader. The slightest gesture on his part brought them back. They were all over the place with their individual joy, yet together; a flock of crazy dogs. Whatever their daylight color, they were each the same deep rich velvety gray in that light. The man was darker still, a black silhouette punched out of the snow. The snow was so pure so white, so bright that it vibrated, casting cold blue shadows. This was a beautiful thing to see from above. The simplicity of the stark world below made a mockery of my pretensions on canvas. "THIS," I said to myself, "is PAINTING. How the hell am I to compete with this?" I felt like such an idiot.

While watching the dog show below I discovered that my face was not simply frozen but frozen in a big grin. I liked this guy and his flock of dogs. Inspired, (who can explain these things) I leaned over the balcony edge and said quietly, "Good morning." It seemed like the right thing to do. The man stopped and looked around. "Up here," I said quietly, "Up here." He looked up, tipped his hat, raised his walking stick as if to say, "Howdy". He stood for awhile watching his dogs and I was compelled to speak again. "Pretty quiet," I said, for that was the thing that had first struck me, the quiet.

The man looked up at me and shook his head in disgust. "Was until you showed up," he grumbled. He snapped his fingers and all the dogs came running toward him. Together, the pack went on beyond my sight, crossing Grove Avenue, toward the south. He was right of course. I was laughing hysterically. "Was until YOU started screamin'."

From my late night painting sessions I knew that the lights at Park and Grove were synchronized. I'd spent many a thoughtless moment on many a thoughtless night just watching them go through their cycles from my window. In the silence of that night, I could *hear* them clearly as they clicked through their cycles. Click-click they changed and the sidewalks in the park turned a soft mint green. Click-click, they changed, and they turned a lovely pink. "This is really nice," I said to myself. Like those dogs I was inspired by this fresh fallen snow. I wanted to go down and run around in it too.

There was not a soul, man, nor dog, nor car for more than an hour after that. Inside, my painting had suddenly acquired snow banks on the periphery.

A couple of months later I met an old man named Amos in the park one night. He asked me where I'd come from and I pointed out my window across the street where I lived. He nodded, "Oh, I see. Unfair advantage." Then he laughed sharply and said, "You the Christmastime Blabbermouth!" "What?"

"You the Christmastime Blabbermouth. You recall 'round n'years when the snow came down on Richmond like a

blanket? I was takin' the hoid up yond Main, there's a place where we go up there. An' right there (he pointed at my place), right up there, the Christmastime Blabbermouth appears like a vision. 'Hey, old black man, look up here at me! HEY, old black man, look at me!' Had to shield my eyes, such was the glory of the Christmastime Blabbermouth. 'Yeah, congratulations,' I said, 'you had the cleverness to be born white.' Course, I didn't realize that someday we'd be friends."

"I remember that night," I said. "It was beautiful."  
"Was...for awhile...yes." He shook his head. "Wakin' up the entire neighborhood with your screechin'.  
"I don't remember it being like that."  
He laughed. "I don't suppose you do, but that's the way it was." He grabbed my knee. "Ha, so now me and the Christmastime Blabbermouth are old friends...Life woiks itself out."

## HELENA

When I was coming home from sculpture class, I passed by Helena Bell-Crane's place and discovered her sitting on the front steps. Her purse was open in her lap and her gloves were sitting on the brick steps beside her. I stopped to ask if everything was alright.

"Oh, Mitchell, dear. I'm so glad to see you. This time I've really done it."

"What's the problem, Helena?"

"Oh, it's not just the lock this time; this time I can't even find my key," she said and began looking through her purse.

I noticed that, as she dug around in there she had one hand clenched tightly. I took her hand gently and turned it over for her to see.

"Is this the missing key?"

"Oh, lands sakes," she said, "How on earth...My goodness, it's like a magic trick isn't it?"

"Well, there you go," I said laughing as I opened the door for her and helped her to her feet, and guided her in. "Are you going to be OK?"

"Yes, of course, why wouldn't I be?" she said, looking around for something on her person, "It's like I'm the magician as well as the rube. Now where are my gloves?" She sat in a small room off one side of the entry as I went out and retrieved the gloves from the step. I came back in and handed them to her.

"Thank you, dear," she said placing the gloves in her suit pocket, "thank you."

"So," I said, "How are you?"

"Howard Hughes?"

“No, how ARE YOU?”

She looked confused, shook her head as if to dislodge a thought and stared at me for a bit. We sat in silence for awhile. She seemed to be catching her breath. She took her gloves out of her pocket and looked at them. After a bit she brightened up and said, “And how is your father?”

“My father?”

“I hope he’s keeping busy since he’s turned the business over to you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, Helena,” I said becoming concerned.

“I’m sorry to say that since Daddy is gone we no longer have anything for you to do, but you certainly do nice work.” She smiled and fiddled with her gloves. We sat. She said, “I don’t think anyone binds a book as neatly as your father, well, and you too of course. We have quite the handsome library.” She looked around, admiring the book shelves in the room. “My lands, it has been years. What brings you by?”

“Do you recognize me?” I asked unnerved by the way things were heading.

“Yes, of course, you’re the bookbinder’s son. I’m sorry I can’t recall your name right at this moment.”

“I’m Mitchell,” I said.

“Mitchell?” she said and rolled the name around in her mind for a while. “I don’t think...was, that his name? No. It wasn’t Mitchell; it was...James or Henry or...But, if you’re not the bookbinder’s son, who are you and what are you doing in my house?” She was suddenly frightened.

“Don’t you remember, I helped you find your key?”

“Oh, please leave,” she said, “you’re frightening me.”

And so I left, pulling the door shut behind myself.

I don't want to get into what a complete and useless pain in the ass it is trying to reach anybody in government whose job it might be to care for people like Helena; but, like all good government workers everywhere—each and every one of the several I talked to was an expert at reciting why something could NOT be done.

About four days later—it happened that quickly—I came out and discovered two big lugs carrying some of Helena's furniture outside and placing it into a moving van.

"Where's Helena?" I asked one of these guys. He just shrugged and nodded over his shoulder. At the door was a man with a clipboard.

"Where's Helena?" I asked him.

"Who's Helena?" he said with smirking indifference (which, by the way, was 30 times more caring than any response I'd gotten from any of the government agencies I tried to deal with a few days earlier.)

"She's the lady who owns this house. Is she alright? I mean, is she going to be alright?"

"Is there something we can do for you?" he asked coldly.

"I'm concerned about Helena. What's happening to her stuff?" I asked.

"Are you concerned about her or about her stuff?" he asked raising an eyebrow accusatorily.

I said nothing.

As a guy who owned three t-shirts, two pairs of jeans, one futon, one bar stool, a record player, four records, and an old cast iron typewriter, I owed no one any explanations.

## HOG

In those days—though I did not drink—we were always hanging out in the Village—a bar owned by two Greek brothers, one of whom was named Nick, and the other one, known to me as The Other One. It was a dark place where all of us self-proclaimed artists and heavy dedicated literary drunks hung out, every night, without end, until closing time. When we left, we left under threat of brutal expulsion. Nick and The Other One were both bruisers who you didn't want to mess with, especially once they asked you to leave.

One night Rick and Ginger and I were tucked away nicely in a booth opposite the bar, deeply involved in the liveliest, most highly intellectual and undeniably witty conversation ever constructed by such a humble team. Regrettably, this conversation has been irretrievably lost, vanishing like mice when the porch light goes on. It's unfortunate of course, because in those days I could not only quote Nietzsche, when pressed I could actually spell Nietzsche. (For this writing, I looked it up.) So, were involved in this most high conversational process, Rick and Ginger and I. That's what I'm getting at.

A big redneck in overalls was sitting at the bar. BIG redneck. He was as large as Rick and I AND Ginger all put together. He looked like he'd spent his entire life on his back in the mud wrestling with the cold indifferent greasy metal undersides of a long line of endlessly failing farm vehicles. While we went about our lofty business, this big guy would, from time to time, rotate around on his swivel stool, glom Ginger, and then spin back around to lean over



his beer. Whenever he swung around and locked his eyes on Ginger, his big round unshaven face broadened into a sloppy grin. Ginger, being Ginger, didn't even notice the guy. But I, being me, did. I was keeping an eye on him because he was big and scary and drunk...all good reasons, as far as I could see, to be cautious.

It started out innocently enough, this swiveling surveillance, sloppy grin routine. At first, he just spun around and looked at Ginger, smiled a wry little smile and spun around again to consult with this beer. But, after a few drinks he spun around, anchored himself permanently with one elbow on the edge of the bar and his beer nestled in his lap. He was grinning like an idiot—which was something I personally understood—but, there was something about the casualness of that posture which set off warning bells within the ever-heroic, but not-to-be-taken-very-seriously, me.

That night, at that hour, driven by whatever heroic idiocy occupied my mind at the time, I began to stare back at this monstrous creature. He was locked so solidly on Ginger that he didn't even see me. I was a gnat. When he did finally notice me, he shrugged, smiled knowingly, snorted, and swung around with his back to us again. Still, I kept my eye on him. After about—who knows—an hour of this kind of school-boy nonsense, something clicked inside the poor man. He was hunched over his beer and, after shaking his head erratically for a long time, placed both palms on the bar; he was about to take action.

I quickly warned Rick and Ginger and we watched as he stood up, turned to face us, shuddered like a wet dog, then, with his head hanging down—a man drawn by shameful but irresistible temptation—lumbered over to our table. He stood there wavering for a few beats, then shrugged—why not?—leaned on the table with both fists, smiled at Ginger and said, “I’m a hog for you honey.”

Having said what needed to be said, he went back to the bar, drained his glass in a single gulp, stood for a second in thought, shook his head, and without looking again in our direction, stumbled out the front door.

It was the finest example of the classic aw-shucks I’ve ever witnessed.

## HOWARD AND THE BICYCLE

Howard was a mystery, not just to me, but, quite possibly to everyone who knew him. He wasn't a student; he wasn't a local—or if he was he was a streamlined, sophisticated, intellectualized, good-lookin', somewhat polished version. Perhaps he was a narc; in those days that was always one option, although I doubt it. I didn't really care if he was; I liked Howard. He maintained a peculiar kind of open, accepting, indifference toward everybody. If you wanted to sit around and drink beer and talk to him, that was OK with him; if you wanted to play chess, that was OK; if you wanted to threaten him by screaming, 'Next time I see you Howard, you little punk-bastard, I'm gonna break your fuckin' neck!'—like I once saw one of his biker neighbors do—that was OK with him as well. Howard was the guy who handed you a stick and a tin can if you walked out one day and everyone on Grove Avenue had spontaneously formed a 60 piece rhythm band. If there was a riot, he'd point you in the direction of the brick pile.

One time when I barely knew the guy, he saw me on the street and said, "Hey, I'm glad I ran into you; wait here.", and he dashed inside and came out with a tube of Cerulean blue. "I saw this and thought that you might like it," he said. I don't know if he stole it or someone; whore or junkie, biker, moron, pedophile or congressman, just left it in his apartment upon hasty departure, but it was nice of him to think of me.

Howard was strangely, inexplicable, surprisingly, knowledgeable as well. One time I was spouting off about some historical event to impress some chick, while sitting

on the front steps where Howard lived...I think it was the construction of the Tower at Pisa. Howard was there, smiling as I jabbered on. When I stopped to take a breath, he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “They *started* building that tower in 1183.” Because of Howard I will always know that date. As you no doubt know already, that tower took over 300 years to complete in the form we now recognize.

Howard lived in the same apartment building as winos, strippers, motorcycle gang members and other small-time drug dealers, yet on any random evening you might see him sitting in the back of a taxicab, dressed in a tuxedo, waving goodbye self-assuredly, on his way to who knows what almost unimaginable social event. Usually however, day or night, you’d see him sitting on the steps to that apartment house drinking beer with some motorcycle muttonhead or playing chess, or reading a book alone, perfectly content.

Although Howard didn’t hold down a job, he always seemed to have money...and plenty of leisure. He was not a dealer. The dealers seemed to know and like Howard however. The building he lived in was owned by one of the biggest dealers in that part of Richmond—a character named, Le Veau. (Let me say here very quickly that although this is a biographical work, any similarity between this guy Le Veau and anyone who may wish to either sue me or cause me physical harm is strictly coincidental.)

Howard was clever. There is no doubt about that. He could beat almost anyone in our little community at poker, pool or chess. I was not as handsome, not as winning, not as

well-read or well-traveled, I didn't have the connections that Howard obviously had, or his confidence. My guess is that Howard could probably dance and knew one fork from another, and probably played a fine bassoon, but he accepted me as an equal. And though this may be the perfect lead-up to the story about the time I got really drunk and finally beat Howard—*resoundingly*—at chess, it will have to wait. (Remind me.)

A reasonable percentage of our little college-based community was, quite naturally, or so I thought back then, drug dealers. In fact, I can't honestly, really recall anyone who didn't deal in drugs on one level or another, at one time or another, advertently or otherwise. To find someone who hadn't handled drugs in our district would be like trying to find an American male who had never driven drunk...or a tap-dancing dodo who could sing Swanee River backwards.

(Just to reiterate, as stated pretty clearly earlier, any drug dealer named Le Veau who may have owned a building on the corner of Grove Avenue and Harrison Street in 1968, along with other buildings throughout the Fan District, and who had a truly lovely wife named Evelyn, who walked a borzoi under the sheltering trees that fine year, and the following year pushed a baby carriage along that same daily route, is strictly a figment of my imagination. Amid all the weighty truth that occupies these pages, this character alone is an invention; he's made up entirely.)

Dealer Le Veau, like all good successful drug dealers, liked his possessions. If you went to his house—a palace of a

place in a highly respectable Richmond neighborhood, with a great little carriage house out back—you would discover stuff everywhere, fine stuff, elegant stuff, expensive stuff. Every detail in every room in the house was hand-carved, exotic hardwood, marble or gilded. He lived like a goddamned millionaire, which I suppose he was. I went to that carriage house one time, by way of the alley, to drop something off. It was then that I realized that Le Veau's love of possessions was without limit. Even to the untrained, completely disinterested, casual, somewhat nervous eye it was immediately clear that this guy liked his possessions. There was no doubt about that. Opulence is the word I suppose. He had furniture, paintings, statuary of every size, shape and medium, every electronic device known to man, there was stuff everywhere. Oh, did I mention guns? He seemed to have a fondness for guns as well. They were laying about on occasional surfaces—tables, mantels, shelves. This was all very strange to me. I had neither possessions nor guns and wanted neither.

As a guy who had to save for a week in order to buy himself a carrot to gnaw on—another thing struck me as a bit peculiar about that place. Le Veau seemed to be casual to the point of carelessness with cash. In those days I always knew, as I do today, almost precisely how much or how little money I had on me. From looking around his place I could see that this man had NO idea how much cash he had. Paper money was everywhere; wads and stacks and bundles and piles like fallen leaves. There were shoe boxes full of cash just lying around. For a guy whose regular acquaintances stole waitresses' tips at three in the morning in order to treat themselves to an order of toast—this

disregard for money was incomprehensible. The thought, “Why don’t you just take some?” stumbled around a bit giddily in my mind before being shoved smartly out the backdoor. To touch any of that cash, undoubtedly, would have proven to be a mistake.

“Go ahead, just grab a fistful!”

So, that’s the guy, Dealer Le Veau. He liked his possessions; he liked his guns, he liked his women—his wife was a trim statuesque, silent, dark-eyes beauty worthy of Monaco, and his mistress (the one I slept with one Summer afternoon while he was playing softball with his lieutenants) was a pornographic fantasy come to life. He also liked real estate. Besides his elegant home with the little carriage house where his couriers collected their goods and brought back the cash, he had several apartment buildings in the Fan District. Howard rented an apartment in the one across the street from where I lived. So, now we’ve come full circle.

On a nice crisp fall day, with leaves from overhanging trees falling gently to the cobblestone street below, I walked outside, and there, in the middle of Grove Avenue was Howard, whom I knew, and Dealer Le Veau, whom I knew of but had never before met. Between them was what anyone would recognize as a bicycle. It had the shape of a bicycle. It was red. However, it was unlike any bicycle I’d ever seen. The frame of the thing was much thinner than what you might expect, the tires looked like they’d been extruded from the same device that makes erasers for the ends of pencils, the seat was like a straight razor wrapped

in leather, and the handlebars were a single straight hollow tube wrapped in shiny white fabric.

I like bicycles. I love bicycles. I think bicycles are one of the cleverest and just plain goddamned most wonderful things that man has ever invented. They're fun too. A good bicycle can introduce a man to flight. So, naturally, I was drawn to these two guys standing around in the middle of the street with this peculiar-looking, emaciated machine. "Wow, that's a pretty nice bike, Howard."

"It's Dealer's."

"You just get it?" I asked Le Veau.

"Cost six thousand dollars," said Dealer Le Veau with an Aristocratic indifference.

I gulped. "Six THOUSAND DOLLARS?" In those days I was making something like...well we've been through that already. Telling me that bike cost six thousand dollars was about the same as saying it had cost six million, or six trillion. Six thousand dollars was about what it cost me to go to school for the year; food housing, tuition, supplies, books, all in.

Howard said, "Lift it." I did.

"Wow. It must only weigh about ten pounds," I said with admiration.

"Seven," said Le Veau, and muttered the precise equivalent in kilograms.

"Wow."

"Bring it by when you're done screwin' around with it, Howard," said Le Veau, and he turned, and walked off. He went straight into the building, just as if he owned the damned place—which he did.



“Watch this,” said Howard and he mounted the bike and gave the sprocket half a crank.

Howard took off, floating quickly down Grove Avenue. He drifted sweetly, smoothly, swiftly for two, long, tree-covered blocks, then, he put his feet down and dragged them along the pavement. He turned the bike around got situated, gave the thing another half crank and it came gliding toward me like downhill on ice. It was lovely to witness. Howard was grinning like a maniac as he started dragging his feet, soles flat and yelling, “Stop me. Stop me. Get in front of me!”

“Use the brakes! Use the brakes!” I yelled. Then, I threw myself in front of him to keep him from going into the intersection. The impact almost knocked me down.

“Why didn’t you brake? What wrong with the brakes?”

“It has no brakes.”

“No brakes? Six thousand dollars and it has no brakes?”

“It’s a track bike, it doesn’t need brakes.” As he climbed off. “It’s made to go; it’s not made to stop.”

I hadn’t noticed that it had no brakes. I HAD noticed that the tires were tiny. And I HAD noticed that the seat looked painful. I couldn’t get over it.

“No brakes?” I said. “It cost six thousand dollars and it’s got no brakes?”

“It’s not made to stop, it’s made to go.” Howard repeated peevishly.

“Where are the shifters?”

“It only has one gear,” said Howard proudly.

“No brakes, one speed...and a seat like a razor blade. This thing is absurd.”

“You want to try it?”

“ABSO-lutely!” I climbed right on.

“OK. Listen,” cautioned Howard, “Don’t give it more than one half crank or you won’t be able to stop. I’m serious; one half crank.”

I promised. That razor sharp seat was every bit as uncomfortable as it looked, but I was anxious to see what a six thousand dollar track bike with one gear and no brakes could do. Howard let loose of the handlebars and I smiled an evil smile. “So-long, Howard,” I said and cranked that goddamned pedal *smartly*.

Instantly, I found myself in a dream world with the parked cars and trees and buildings on Grove Avenue slipping quietly behind me. There goes a dog. There go some passersby. The only sound I could hear was the wind in my ears and the high-pitched whirr of the spokes. It was like riding something shot out of a cannon. I was rapidly approaching the intersection at Lombardi—an intersection where there was bound to be cross traffic—and started emergency stopping measures. Now I knew why Howard was so quick to start dragging his feet. The damned thing didn’t want to stop. You’d think that a machine weighing seven pounds would be a pushover but it was tricky simply because it was so light. The damned thing was skittish.

Anything less than perfectly-balanced resistance applied equally on both sides and that bike took off in a new direction. I started swooping in large switchbacks to control this tendency, but that only seemed to make it take on speed; the damned thing was built to take turns practically lying down. In essence, I was riding on a six thousand

dollar gyroscope. It was bullheaded and high-strung and frightening. The only thing I could do, while wobbling wildly out of control, was to straddle the cross bar and thrust my feet straight out in front of me, while praying.

We came to a sudden catastrophic stop when one of my big stupid feet caught on the pavement and turned under, nearly ripping my foot off in the process. The six thousand dollar bike went flying into the air, I was heading face first toward the pavement...

The acrobatic maneuver that followed can not, I think, be described, as I, with one hand still on the handlebar, landed flat on my back, carried the bike in a large arc over my head and somehow managed to bring it bouncing to earth, perfectly upright, without any harm. Had I practiced the maneuver every day for a thousand years I never could have duplicated that move. It was like something out of a cartoon. I looked back down Grove Avenue, to see if Howard was watching but, thankfully, he was nowhere in sight. Quickly I got to my feet, and while shaking from head to toe, straddled the bike just as though nothing had happened; just as though I had not almost destroyed some drug dealer's six thousand dollar track bike; just as if I hadn't almost killed myself and twisted my arm off in my efforts to save the damned thing.

I stood there panting for a bit, thinking about what kind of trouble I might have been in if I had destroyed Dealer Le Veau's bike. I was gibbering out loud, trying to convince myself that everything was alright. I put on my very best phony smile, pointed the bike down the center of Grove

Avenue, I gave it a tender (a gentle little...) crank, the slightest little crank, a nudge, nothing more, and drifted slowly homeward. In seconds I was back where I'd started and Howard was running beside me to keep me from coasting into cross traffic at Harrison.

Howard was laughing hysterically. I was still pretty giddy myself. He had no idea what had just transpired. "Where'd you go, man?"

"I just went down to Lombardi." I got off the bike and let Howard hold it up; my knees were wobbling.

"I thought you'd decided to take it for a ride or something."

"Nope, just down to Lombardi."

"It's pretty nice, isn't it?"

"Yep."

"It's amazing isn't it?"

"Yep."

"This could be yours, Edward, if you only got off your artistic ass and started peddling smack!" Howard laughed loudly.

"Six thousand dollars, Howard."

"Amazing huh?"

"For six THOUSAND dollars, Howard, it ought to be amazing."

Howard was laughing as he lifted the bike with one hand and carried it away. As I watched him enter the building, I was shaking my head in disgust, thinking, "Six thousand dollars for god's sake. One speed. No brakes. Tiny little macaroni tires. A seat like a goddamned razor blade. My ass is already sore. It's belligerent, it's skittish, it's impossible to control.

The damned thing is completely unpredictable and extremely dangerous and ...six thousand DOLLARS!" I snorted. "For god's sake."

Still, I thought, 'Flies like a bird...

...worth every penny."

## PHYLLIS

One night, around that same time, I went across to the park and sat down on a bench near Slim and just looked up at the moon with him. After a while he said quietly, "Mind if I talk?" and offered me a swig from his bottle.

"No thanks."

"Tempted?"

"No."

"Scared t'?"

"No."

"I'm not drunk...You believe me?"

"No."

"Didn't think you would. I admit it. I might cry though."

"It's OK to cry."

"Grown man."

"It's OK," I said.

He repeated, "I'm not drunk." And offer me the bottle again. "Want some?"

"No thanks."

"Look at that old moon will you? Solid as a rock. There she is."

"There she is."

"I left my wife in Carolina. That was 16 years ago. August 11. I guess it's all for the best. What do you think?"

"I don't know. Heck, I don't know anything, Slim. I'm just a kid."

"Nah, you know stuff. I seen it."

"Yeah, sure. I know a little about visual perception and that's absolutely useless."

"I had to leave her. I suppose you could have guessed that. I *had* to, so, I did," he said, "I had to. I'm not drunk though, you know that don't you?"

"Sure."

"Just up and left her." He snapped his fingers weakly.

"Like that." We sat for a while.

"Which Carolina?" I asked with what I thought was appropriate solemnity.

He looked at me bitterly. The look seemed to demand apology.

"Sorry," I said.

"You should be. Is that the best you can come up with? Which Carolina? Does it make any difference in the matter?"

"I'm sorry," I said again. He shook his head in disgust. We sat in silence for a bit more.

"I tried to write. I tried to explain a thing. I just stood there outside the door and listened to her cry. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. After a bit, I just left."

"Slim..." I started.

"This is the stuff that hurts," he said. "I don't want you to ever understand any of it."

"I'd like to."

"You can't. I hope you never do, but, don't you have any answers though? They teach you anything about such in that school? This is the stuff a man needs to know."

"I don't have any answers for you," I admitted.

"Her name was Phyllis," he said.

## MY AFFAIR WITH A DRUG DEALER'S WIFE

Somehow one year—and this is the way things happened in those days—in the Spring, all the wives of mid-level drug dealers in our little district emerged from their freshly painted, fully renovated, antebellum houses with matching Afghan hounds on the ends of long fine leather leashes. Of the three that I recognized two were also pushing baby carriages...well, top of the line, European baby carriages with overly large spoke wheels and finely tooled brass fittings. So, I don't know, count backward and you discover that there was some real activity in the mid-level drug dealer bedrooms of Richmond's Fan District the previous Summer...and perhaps some carelessness. Of course it was nice to see that the mid-level drug dealers were prospering.

They all had fine wives.

These fine, trim, elegant beings were perfectly suited for the matching Afghan hounds which trotted like peculiar-looking ponies in front of them. The word *noble* comes to mind. Along with the word *envy*. But let's forget about me for the moment and concentrate on the drug dealers' wives, any one of which might have fit in comfortably, and purposefully unnoticed, Opening Night at the Met. Each looked as though she'd just stepped out of the pages of some glossy New York City fashion magazine ...but casually, of course...decked out merely by chance.

The dealers themselves—in those very few times I got a glimpse of one—must have had a morning ritual, rubbing the finest grade sand paper over every inch of their face and hands. Whatever the process, it produced that unmistakable



upper-class Aristocratic glow. That look appears in people who had accumulated their wealth by more socially acceptable means as well. They also had that *Yeah, I'm a rich guy, but my superiority is innate* smugness. But, their wives, Oh, those drug dealers' wives, they were something else. They were completely off limits for one thing. They were certainly nice to look at from a distance however.

So, all during that Spring and Summer, you might, from time to time, observe one of these graceful creatures strolling under the sheltering trees of Grove Avenue or down the ancient brick sidewalks of Park Avenue, looking like a goddess, pulled through the dappled sunlight by her devoted, goofy-looking, hounds (breathe here), and you might wonder, 'Why now?', 'Why Afghans?' But, then of course, you'd realize, 'Why not?'

One day, (now we're getting somewhere) I saw two of these women standing on the corner of Park and Harrison with their hounds and baby carriages and I realized something. I realized that, if they weren't sisters, they may as well have been. It was very much as if only one of them was standing there in front of a full-length mirror. This was without question the largest gathering of drug dealers' wives since the battle royale, 26 inning, softball game the previous summer between the Checkered Demons and the sub-culture rock band, Titfield Thunderbolt, an event which I observed, but in which I did not partake. (Final score: Checkered Demons 304, Thunderbolt 27.)

When this gathering of wives and dogs and baby carriages took place I was in the park across the street, sitting on a bench, arms-length away from a smelly old wino.

"Look at that," I said.

"Yeah, yeah," he said.

"What do you think of those dogs?" I asked.

"Puh.." he replied.

"Those are pretty expensive dogs..."

He rolled his eyes about and spit.

"What do you think of those young women?"

He looked. He pondered. "Too skinny."

"Really? You think they're too skinny? I like 'em," I said.

He looked again. He gave it some thought. "Too much trouble."

"What kind of dogs are those...do you know?" I asked.

"A dog's a dog," he said and spit again. "They're too much trouble too."

So, I was wondering what kind of dogs those were, and inspired by *the spirit of inquisity* (in those days I had that), I got up and made my way across the street with every intent of approaching the drug dealers' wives and asking, "Say...what kind of strange looking animals are those?" But, as I was approaching, whetting my lips in prep—a young woman stopped near them and asked with ringing, bell-like effervescence, "Those are Afghans, aren't they?" The drug dealers' wives confirmed, in a cheerful but overly-dignified manner, that they were indeed.

Later on that same week, I was carrying a painting somewhere, walking down Grove Avenue, under the trees, and the most beautiful of all the beautiful drug dealers' wives stepped out of one of the several houses her hubby owned on that street (common knowledge), led by one of these big stupid-looking dogs. Although I have always been

shy—and by shy I mean socially awkward—she just looked so lovely that I could not help but smile as our approach to each other narrowed. And, she caught that. And she smiled at me. I must have blushed (though I hate to admit it). I blushed even more deeply when that dog stopped in front of me and stuck his nose directly into my crotch. She laughed in a remarkably feminine way, placing one hand over her mouth, and said, “Oh, I’m so sorry”, as I took the animal’s snout in my hand and, with some authority, removed it from my crotch.

Then, me and the drug dealer’s wife just looked into each other’s sparkling eyes for an unreasonable (and by that I mean possibly dangerous) few seconds. Then I think we both blushed and bowed our heads, still laughing. When we bobbed up again we explored each other’s eyes for a while more, until I finally came up with something to say.

I said, “That’s an Afghan isn’t it?”

She said, “No, actually he’s a Borzoi.”

But she said it in such a way that I was pretty sure she really meant, “Why don’t you and I just run off together? We could have a really good time.”

That was pretty much our entire affair. It lasted 47 seconds. My hope is that when my life flashes before my eyes, just before I make that eternal leap, I’ll re-live that moment. I’ve come pretty close just now, by telling it.

## ONE HIT WANDER

If anyone on earth was born to be an artist in the grandest sense of the word, it was Ducky. Anyone who knew anything at all about painting recognized his enormous talent almost instinctually. Better yet, people in the position to help Ducky attain greatness seemed eager to do whatever they could for him. Beyond that—and more irritating still—whether they knew him as a great artist or not, every man, woman, child, dog, cat, bird, cop, thief, politician and drooling idiot loved Ducky on sight. There was just something about him. Women wanted to bed him, men wanted to claim him as their friend; from the moment he set foot on campus, Ducky was a celebrity. To talk to him, to hang around with him, simply to be seen with him, was all so very cool. And, although we both had pieces stolen from the Emerging Artists' Show, at the Virginia Museum of Art, Ducky *sold* three pieces, and won Best in Show. Still, to have my entry stolen—along with Ducky's—was quite an honor.

In those days painting at our school was predominantly hard-edge. That means large cohesive, un-modulated fields of color bordering each other with crisp, clean, typically straight, lines. These paintings were usually executed on very large canvasses. The justification for this—and almost any other atrocity committed in the world of art—could be found in *Art Forum*. Though scale was a matter worthy of investigation unto itself, I'm not sure that any of us understood it at that time. But we were influenced by the Washington color school—professional painters from nearby D.C.—and they painted BIG.

Ducky was shaking things up locally by producing work that one admiring instructor described as, ‘incorporating the hard edge approach with traditional classic painting techniques’. Basically, he painted the bottom two thirds of his long canvases with wavering un-modulated locales stacked like geological strata, and dashed off some painterly, relatively unconvincing, clouds in the upper third. This won him awards and notoriety, and, a growing pool of fawning followers, both instructors and students.

My work, at that point, was strictly, and somewhat defiantly neither large nor hard edge. Translation: small and dull. My paintings were also rock solid, meaning, predictable, easily understood, and readily dismissed. In fact it was serious work and each of my stupid little paintings took as much as two weeks to accomplish. Ducky was one of the first people to recognize my work for what it was, and at some point he invited me over to his place. Anyone might tremble with delight at such an invitation. Not really a social creature by nature, I trembled with fear.

When I got there, it was Ducky and a kid named Wayne, who looked like a somewhat civilized Mick Jagger, a kid named Aaron who everybody simply adored because his cranium, from every indication, contained no brain, and a fat chick without any name who had taken it upon herself to wait hand and foot on Ducky. After she left, Wayne pulled out a reefer and these guys began to pass it around. When offered, I said, “I don’t smoke, thanks,” and that was OK. But, after a while of breathing in their exhaust I reconsidered my position and announced meekly that I’d, you know, maybe give it a try.

After instruction I took a small hit and watched them as they watched me, before moving on to other things.

Before long my ears began to get really hot, and I asked.

“Is it normal for your ears to get really hot?”

“Your ears are hot?”

“Yeah, my ears are cookin’” I said, and, as it turned out that was very possibly the most hilarious thing anyone had ever said in the entire history of mankind. When I finally stopped coughing, I looked up and noticed that Ducky had the head of a rabbit, Wayne had the head of a donkey and Aaron looked a great deal like a sea-going turtle. I thought that was a little peculiar, but those transformations seemed alright with me at the time.

“How do you like it?” asked the donkey.

“It’s OK.”

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Yeah, except for these hot ears.”

“You realize that you’re now a felon,” said the rabbit.

“Worse,” said the turtle, “is the paranoia.”

“Well, I don’t know why this should be illegal,” I said. As for paranoia, this was one of the very few times in my life that I felt perfectly comfortable; better still, I felt like I belonged.

“Oh, no!” said the donkey suddenly, and pointed toward the ceiling. We all looked up where he was pointing. There was a poster taped up there depicting a large hole in the lath and plaster. A cop was looking down at us, and another was already stepping through the hole on his way down to nab us. I cracked up, but soon found myself thinking about my stroll around campus the first day I arrived at RPI.

I was walking toward the site of the future library, when a young man, barefoot and bare-chested, came running down the street, chased by a man in a dark suit. Seconds later, a blue Ford sedan came speeding down the street, jumped the curb, and screeched to a halt inches from the kid. The doors flew open and three men in suits popped out. They dragged the young man to the ground, and started swinging away wildly with their fists. After exhausting themselves, they yanked him to his feet, threw him in the back seat of the Ford, backed out, and drove off.

"Wow," I said to a campus cop who arrived huffing heavily beside me, "what was that about?"

"Dope," he said smugly. "Those men are federal agents. It's really great to see the good guys in action isn't it?"

"Look at this," said the goat, jarring me back to my senses. He handed me the album cover of Beggar's Banquet.

"Look inside." And so, I did. And it was the most remarkable thing I had ever seen in my entire life; I had never seen anything like that. I'd never even imagined anything like that. I began to study it. And, I studied it so deeply and for so long that when I surfaced again Ducky, Wayne, and Aaron had all departed. I didn't remember them leaving, though I did vaguely recall acknowledging something one of them had said. I looked to the cops above and snorted. At that rate, those guys were never gonna catch me. I got up and made my way down an exceptionally long hall and out the door.

The day was brilliant. Looking around I realized for the first time that street signs lead a quiet little life of their own...which I could not help but admire.

## CALVIN

It was almost night in Richmond and Richmond has some pretty dark nights. Calvin and I were walking along talking—deeply involved, tinkering with race matters in our own tiny way—when we inadvertently found ourselves on *the wrong side* of Broad Street...the wrong side of Broad Street for me that is. When we realized where we were, Calvin said “You better turn back, man.” He looked pretty serious.

“Nonsense,” I said laughing. “You think I’m afraid to be in this district at night?”

“If you were as smart as you think you are, you would be.” I laughed my heartiest imitation-dismissive laugh.

“I ain’ jokin’ with you, Edward. This is another part of town and there are people who will not be pleased by your presence here.”

“But, Calvin, you’ll protect your friend, Edward, won’t you?”

“Yeah but I’m just one man, an’ I ain’t that big,” he said.

“And,” he added, “when the goin’ get’s tough I have a tendency to run.”

We continued walking.

When we were about three blocks into what Calvin called “the nigger district” he said, “OK, listen to me, this is serious now. If I say run, you better run; and you better run in that direction,” he pointed in the direction from which we’d just come. “You better RUN to *the other side* of Broad Street; the white side; the right side; the safe side. And don’t stop until you get in-side and lock the door. Are we in agreement?” He was in earnest.



“Calvin,” I said, “I am no more welcome over there than I am over here, maybe less.”

“Yeah, well you don’t want to find out how welcome you are over here, believe me.”

I was getting spooked by all this talk, but tried my best not to show it. After all I was young and supposed to feel invulnerable.

“You want to break down some racial barriers?” he asked turning to me with a smile. “OK then, we can do that, Skippy.”

“Look, Calvin...” I said, “I just want to see where you live. You’ve been to my place, I thought I’d like to see where you live, meet your grandmother...”

Calvin laughed sarcastically. “Oh yeah, my grandmother. She would for sure love to walk in and find herself a white boy sitting in her living room. You got to be out your mind; my granny would cut you herself. Slice you up. She find you in her house, first thang she do is grab a knife. She don’t want no white boy in her house; what would the neighbors think?”

“You can’t have me in your own house?”

“Forget that, OK? The answer is ‘No’, but what I was askin’ was, do you want to shoot some pool?”

“Pool? I’d love to shoot a little pool.”

“Good, ‘cause there’s the place for it.”

He motioned across at a small dark corner bar with a long neon sign hanging down from the roof saying “JUBI” in flickering pinkish neon.

“You think I’m afraid to go in there with you?” I said bravely.

Calvin was laughing hysterically. He gathered himself up enough to slap me on the shoulder. "No, man, I'm just kidding with you, Edward. Two of us go in Jubi, we'd be lucky if one of us comes back out alive. And," he said, "that one WILL be me."

Did I say that in those days I was crazy? I wasn't heroic. I wasn't brave. I may have been stupid, I don't know. But for sure, when it came to certain things, I was crazy. I looked at Calvin. I looked at the front door of that bar. I wanted to reach that place in a single bound. If I had known how to do cartwheels, I would have tumbled my way across that street. (I was born in Gary, Indiana for god's sake.)

"I don't think you can stop me," I challenged.

"I ain't even gonna try."

"How close do you figure I'll get?"

"Fore you come to your senses, or fore they kill you?"

"Fore they kill us both, because if I'm goin' in there, you're going in with me." I grabbed a fistful of Calvin's jacket and started dragging him across the street toward Jubi. He dug his heels in and put up a struggle until, out of breath and laughing so hard neither of us could breathe, we stood on the shattered sidewalk in front of the place, bent over in laughter, two young idiots teetering on the precipice. When we pulled ourselves upright again, he studied me for a bit. "OK, Mr. Big Man White Boy College Death-wish Fool, follow me." Calvin placed his hand on the door.

The next thing I knew Calvin and I were standing inside the bar and every head in the place was turning to look at us.

Oh, and we were no longer laughing. I should make that clear. It didn't seem like the wise thing to do.

"Don't look at 'em," whispered Calvin as he took the bar stool closest to the door. I climbed up on the one next to him. Since he was between me and my escape I envisioned plowing right through him on my desperate way out of there. In those days Hollywood movies had not yet started promoting the idea that a white man can put himself in almost any situation and end up loved—when not worshipped outright—by the locals. Wisely I lowered my head and began staring at the bar top in front of me. Calvin was trying to act like he was a just a neighborhood kid who'd stumbled in for a beer, which was pretty much what he was. Calvin was, in fact, in deed, in every way possible, a neighborhood kid who stumbled in to have a beer. Me? I was just his invisible friend.

That became obvious when the barkeep came over and tossed a coaster on the bar in front of Calvin and raised his chin. "What kind of beer do you have?" I detected a quiver in Calvin's voice.

"We got one kind of beer," said the bartender coldly, "you want some fancy-ass college beer I suppose? He slammed a bottle down in front of Calvin. Calvin looked at me and snickered. "We in it now," he whispered.

It was like the first line of a joke—Two college kids, one black, one white, stumble into a black bar in Richmond Virginia; it's 1969... I cringed at every possible punch line I could come up with. The other customers started commenting on the matter openly and loudly. "We don't

allow no college kids in here.” and “Can’t he get his beer over there with the white folk now?” I was thinking, “Man, they are as prejudiced as ‘we’ are.”

I was sitting there with my head hung very low, watching Calvin from under my brow. He was restraining himself, trying not to laugh. I was trying not to cry. The bar keep snorted and started to walk away. “Man, we are IN it,” hissed Calvin. It took a while, and a couple thrown elbows from me, before Calvin cleared his throat and demanded, “How ‘bout one for my friend?”

I leaned over and reminded him, “I don’t drink, Calvin, you know that.” (In those days I didn’t drink.)

“You got a friend comin’?” asked the bar keep?

“It’s OK, Calvin,” I said quickly, “I don’t drink.”

The bartender, overhearing that, reached down below the counter, pulled out three cold beers and clunked them on the counter in front of us, “Two drink minimum!” he declared. Apparently, from the uproarious response behind us, this was one of the funniest and most righteous statements ever made. “Boy says he don’t drink.” “D’hell’s he doin’ in a bar then?” “D’fuck’s he doin’ in DIS bar?” “Jesus,” I said, and leaning toward Calvin I whispered, “Look, let’s just get out of here.”

“Just stay there,” said Calvin urgently.

“But, I...”

“I’ll drink the beer,” he whispered, “don’t worry; just stay where you are. It’s cool.”

“It don’t feel cool.”

“Shhhhhh.”

The barkeep went down to the far end of the bar and leaned against it and started talking to a pitch-black woman in a flowery house dress. She was smoking long skinny cigarettes and staring fixedly at me. I didn't have the nerve to turn around and face the rest of the customers, but I imagined that there were hundreds of them. It felt like there were hundreds of them. I imagined that they all had their eyes on me. I imagined that they weren't really pleased to have me in there. Well, perhaps I didn't imagine that part. The idea that I would consume my first alcoholic beverage—first TWO alcoholic beverages—as the unwelcome guest in a black bar, in a black district, surrounded with people I couldn't see, under the hostile eye of the barkeep, was a little unnerving. On the other hand I felt like a beer might be precisely what I needed at that moment.

"Try it," Calvin urged quietly.

"I don't drink," I hissed back.

"Hey," shouted the bar keep suddenly, "This is a drinking establishment. If you ain't gonna drink then get out!"

Drink or get out. God bless that man. It was an excellent suggestion, and I sensed that it had come from the barkeep's heart. I started to get up and Calvin put his hand on my thigh, "Stay right there."

"Why?"

"Learnin' experience." He laughed almost inaudibly. "You wanted it, now you got it."

"This isn't funny to me anymore, Calvin."

"It's OK. Prove a point," he said.

We were sitting there like that, Calvin holding me down, the barkeep and his skinny girl friend with their cold eyes

locked on us, when the door swung open and in ambled one of the largest human beings I'd ever seen in my life. I didn't see him directly—Calvin was sitting between me and the front door—but his massive presence completely blocked out the mirror behind the bar as he squeezed by behind us. Quickly I was back to staring fixedly at the countertop in front of me. My nose sank closer to the bar when I heard the scraping of barstools and the wheezing sound of the huge man taking up the stool beside me. I could actually feel the heat of his presence. I could smell his sweat; I could hear his breathing. I watched in the mirror as this man's enormous head swiveled slowly in my direction and, Lord, have mercy on poor ol' Edward, his eyes locked on me.

Calvin said nothing, just sat there, hoisted his beer and sipped. My hero. My friend. I kept my head down as far as I could while keeping both eyes on the mirror. I was dazzled by my predicament; blinded by the headlights of fully-loaded on-coming tractor-trailer, fascinated by the unavoidable catastrophic collision that was at hand. I felt like I was observing myself from outside. The barkeep came down, stood directly in front of me, blocking the mirror and my view of my gargantuan admirer, slapped a napkin on the bar and said, "Mike?"

"Bucket," said Mike.

This I swear to you, the barkeep took *an aluminum bucket* from off the counter behind the bar and stood in front of me filling it with draft beer. It was, as far as I could tell, about a four hour process. Meanwhile "Mike" and the barkeeper were both fixed on me.

"And?"

“Turkey,” said Mike. He had turned to face me again while he said this.

For some reason this got a big laugh from everybody behind me, and when I looked at Calvin, he was laughing too. The barkeep took down a bottle of Wild Turkey whiskey and poured out a healthy shot and put it in front of Mike. When he left, returning to the woman at the end of the counter, I got a clear view of the big man beside me again. He was slugging the beer from the bucket, had it up to his mouth with both hands...a BUCKET. Where I came from they filled such a thing with ice and stuck three or four bottles of beer in there. After setting the bucket down, he slowly turned and looked at me with hooded eyes. I could feel his beery breath on my face. Was he purposefully breathing on me? In the mirror I watched in horror as Calvin grimaced in exaggerated fear. Meanwhile, the big man beside me continued to stare at me in silence. Calvin was mouthing something to me repeatedly, but I could not tell what.

By this time Calvin had finished his two beers and reached over to take one of mine. The barkeep saw his hand reaching for it and ran the length of the bar to grab the beer from Calvin and stare at him. He said, “Nuh. You can’t come in here and drink other people’s beer now.” He pushed my beer back in front of me. Calvin was smiling and nodding and, god help us all, he actually leaned in across the bar and gave a goofy little wave to the monster beside me.

The big guy finished the tub of beer and slammed down the shot of Wild Turkey and leaned onto the bar with his huge,

monumental, forearms. He intertwined his meaty fingers and started nodding his huge head while staring, in the mirror directly into my eyes. I tried to concentrate on the beer in front of me, but couldn't help but look up from time to time. Each time I stole a glance, he was still staring at me. Neither Calvin nor I knew what to do.

The barkeep yelled, "More, Mountain?"

The big man turned to me and said quietly, "What do you think?"

My eyes moved toward the man who had addressed me but my head stayed facing the counter in front of me. I scratched the side of my face nervously. "Me?" I asked weakly.

"Yeah. You think I should have another bucket..." he said moving his big head closer to my ear, "Snowflake?"

Though he'd whispered it, all the folks in the bar laughed and made comments. Calvin covered up his own laughter. I kept my eyes to myself.

The big man was patient, in no hurry, immobile, waiting for my answer. There had been a lot of chatter going on behind me up to this point. That had all disappeared.

Everybody in the bar was waiting for my answer. It was like some kind of badly staged play. The barkeep was now leaning with both elbows on the bar, he seemed entertained by my situation.

"Well..?"

I shrugged. "Well... you're a pretty big guy," I began pseudo-casually, "why not?"

My voice cracked as I spoke, and I spoke very softly, and I had to clear my throat a couple times before getting all eight, finely crafted words out, but I said it. I did not smile



nor did I look at the man, but I said what I had to say. He leaned away from me and shouted, "Willie!"

"Mountain," said the barkeep from his place at the far end of the bar.

"Bucket and a shot."

"You want another?" the barkeep asked me while filling the bucket and looking down at my two full, warm, putrefying bottles.

"I'll take another," said Calvin suddenly.

"No, you will *not*. You," he said widening his eyes, "definitely will not."

After downing half the bucket of beer, the big man said, "You shoot, Snowflake?"

"Shoot?"

"Use a stick?"

"Stick?" I was frightened and disoriented; I had no idea what he could possibly be saying.

"Pool," whispered Calvin. "He's talkin' about pool."

I cleared my throat. "Uh, yeah, I shoot a little."

"Let's shoot, Snowflake," said the big black man as he put two huge hands flat on the bar top and raised his bulk off the two flattened stools that he'd been sitting on.

I got up and followed the huge man to the tiny, ill-lit pool table.

"Don't forget your beer," shouted someone from the dark and there was laughter. "Bofe ob 'em," someone added and that got more raucous laughter.

At the pool table, Mountain put out one huge palm and stood looking at me. I looked to Calvin for guidance and he

started fishing around desperately for the quarter that was needed to get the game underway.

"Eight Ball," said the big man and put out his other hand. From the darkened side of the bar someone stepped forward and placed a pool cue in the man's huge hand. It looked like a toothpick. I started to look around for a cue. This was a process that seemed to demand the advice of several people who advised me loudly. "Take a heavy one; you gonna need it." "Don't use Jerome's, he don't like no one to touch his stick." "Ain't got y' own custom stick?"

As is my habit, I just took the first thing my hand fell to. I looked at the tip briefly and went back and stood nervously beside the table.

"Solid ebony," said the big man holding his stick out for me to admire, "hard as a rock, made of the same stuff white cops use to bloody the black man's skull." He turned it so I could appreciate the butt end. "Cue like this," he said, slapping the thing in the palm of his hand, "you can beat any man...and I mean beat." I nodded...I may have whimpered. "You don't want t' sight down that stick, check it for flaws?" he asked. There was laughter.

"Naw."

"You sure? You sure that's the stick for you, now?" He licked his big lips and grinned.

"Uh, you want to break or you want me to break?" I said with more than the slightest trace of nervousness.

What the Mountain didn't know, Calvin didn't know, no one in that bar knew, is that we had a pool table when we were kids and rarely in life did I feel more comfortable than with a pool cue in my hand. When I was shooting pool, I

was at ease. "Guest breaks," said the man, "Loser drinks a bucket and a shot." Who was I to argue?

"He don't drink," said Calvin quickly.

"He lose, he drink," said the big man, while looking at me. This was the funniest thing anyone in that bar had heard all night. *He lose, he drink. They'd win no matter who won the game.* If he won I was force-fed beer and a shot of whiskey, if I won I guess tradition dictated that I buy him his next round. It didn't seem fair, but it did galvanize my conviction to beat this guy, if I could.

I moved to the side of the table, inserted the quarter, released the balls, listened to them drop. Calvin racked them. I moved to the end of the table while the big man repositioned himself on the two bar stools he'd previously punished. I broke without hesitation, got a pretty good scatter and dropped a couple balls. I didn't know what anyone's reaction was, because when I shoot pool nothing else exists for me beyond the table.

"You want?" asked the big man from his throne.

"Huh?"

"Balls you want?"

"I have to sink a called shot first," I said.

"What?" There was loud complaining coming from throughout the bar.

"You have to sink a *called shot* before you can choose," I said, "It's the rule."

"What you talkin' 'bout. I been shootin' eightball all my big fat BLACK-assed life and you just sunk two balls, so choose."

Sitting near me, Calvin was urging me to choose and choose quickly. Martyred, I winced and hung my head and

sighed deeply. Should I attempt to explain the rules of this game to this man, in this situation?

“OK,” I sighed. I studied the table. “I’ll take the high ones.”

“You sunk solids and you takin’ the stripes?”

“Yes.” I said.

“You sunk SOLIDS and you takin’ the STRIPES?” He was shaking his big head from side to side and there was laughter throughout the place...and plenty of free advice.

“Yes.” I said.

He nodded. “Go ahead then.”

I shrugged, called and took my first shot. It was a nice clean shot, nothing special, but there was a rumbling in the crowd. I called the next shot and it dropped softly. The atmosphere was infused with drama. Calvin was sitting on a stool behind me, as I lined up the next shot, chanting, “Don’t do this, Edward, don’t do this, Edward, don’t do this, Edward.” It was like a bad Hollywood movie: a white-boy comes to Harlem and teaches the locals how to shoot pool. I looked at the table; it was tempting; nicely set up for an easy victory, but I didn’t want this mountainous black man angry at me; if necessary I’d figure out how to get out of drinking the bucket of beer later. Calvin, who’d been raised in that neighborhood and who knew these people better than anyone, was pleading with me, quietly, desperately, to throw the game. I started shooting riskier and riskier shots, but they continued to drop like in a dream.

Calvin jumped off of his stool and threw himself on my shoulders saying, “What are you doing? What are you doing?” I looked at my opponent and he was smiling at me.

Now, all my doubts were gone. The table was set for me to sink two balls with my next shot. No matter what I did one of them would drop, and with either luck or skill or any combination of the two, they'd both disappear. It was a rock-solid certainty. I took the time to glance over at the big guy (smiling, encouraging) and then at Calvin (neither). He had his eyes closed; he'd given up on me and now seemed to be pleading directly with the powers above. He was shaking his head and saying breathlessly, "No. No. No. Edward, no."

The big guy was leaning back with his elbows on the counter behind him, smiling, waiting. He had a toothpick in his mouth. He didn't seem concerned. The barkeep had abandoned his post with his lady friend and he was standing behind him, supposedly cleaning glasses. He didn't appear to be either for me or against me.

This game was being orchestrated in heaven. I called the shot. I pointed. The phrase, *cock-sure* comes to mind for some reason here. Recognizing what I was about to do somebody stood up and shouted, "OK, Slick! When the magic's workin', *work* the magic!" (An informed audience is always heartening.) I took the shot—and maybe it was better for everyone—one ball came to rest on the lip of the pocket. If I had whistled a sharp note that ball would have dropped. When I looked up to surrender the table, things in that place had changed.

An undeniable chill had blown in through the open front door.

## RASHID

When I turned a skinny black kid in a full-length black leather coat and a black beret was standing behind me. He was leaning on Mountain's shoulder as if he owned him. Mountain was sitting with his hands in his lap, like a schoolboy on good behavior, hoping not to be called on by the teacher. The skinny kid was grinning and actively picking his teeth with a toothpick. His front teeth were both gold. He was nodding knowingly, grinning at me. There was only silence in that place.

"You a cop?" he asked me.

"Me? No."

"You better hope you *are* a mother-fuckin' cop. Or you better hope I think you might be, 'cause much as we don't 'llow cops in here, we even mo' don't 'llow white boys without the full weight an' authority of the law behin' em."

I didn't know what to say to that. What could anyone say to that? I was feeling pretty defenseless. In the barroom mirror, my own image looked tiny and pale and very far away. He raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

"You got no response to my proper interrogatory?"

"I'm not a cop," I said, "if that's what you mean."

"Well, some of us have decided we don't want you in here whatever you are," he said, taking a step toward me. "Some of the rest of us *resent* your presence in one of the only places we might be *allowed*, by your indulgence, to call home."

I didn't know what to say to that either. He was a skinny little bastard, and I imagined just walking over, picking him up and breaking him in half over my knee. Not that I've

ever done such a thing; I've never in my life even thrown a punch. I was fairly certain that this would be the wrong place to throw my first.

"You got no response to this which I have said either?"

I said nothing.

"You stupid, is that it?" I didn't say anything. I didn't move. I just stood there looking at this kid with the toothpick.

"You got nothing to say?" he demanded.

Someone said, "Rashid, why'n't you just let him go ahead and get out of here?"

"*The people* want me to overlook your mis-step," he said and laughed. "You want me to overlook his misstep, Midget?" He leaned on Mountain's shoulder as he addressed him.

Mountain said, "He's just a college kid, Mr. X."

The skinny evil bastard came over toward me and stopped about two feet away, picking his teeth and looking me in the eye. "You just a college kid?"

"I'm a student. Yes."

"They don't teach you nothin' bout not going into certain neighborhoods and struttin' your cleverness and educational superiority? They don't teach you nothin' bout how some of us *lesser folk* might find your superiority ranklin'?" With each question he was moving in closer to me and jutting his chin up further. "You think you can jus' waltz in here with us niggers, shoot a little sloppy pool with the Midget here and stroll on out again after trampin' on our pride? We s'posed to thank you for the honor of your presence? You a hero? That it? You some kind of white-knight pool shootin' mother-fuckin' hero?"

There was a booming voice from nowhere, “Jerome!” and everything stopped.

“Rashid!” corrected the young punk bitterly without turning to face the source of that commanding voice.

The barkeep was standing there, on our side of the bar, with a baseball bat held threateningly in one hand. “I ain’t havin’ it. Not in my place, Jerome.”

The hoodlum turned his head.

“Rashid! An’, whyn’t you keep to your own business, old man?”

“This is my business, Jerome. You want to cut up some of these college boys, that’s your business—business of you and your friends— but you do it outside the Jubi.”

Jerome turned and started for the door. “I’ll be waitin’ for *you* outside,” he said and pointed a finger at me like a gun.

“Better drink up,” said someone, “I understand it hurts less if you’re drunk.”

I turned to Calvin, “What am I supposed to do?”

Calvin said nothing. He looked at me, he looked around at the bar keep. He looked into the depths of the bar room.

There was no solution offered by anyone. The bar keep came up to me and offered me the baseball bat. “I suggest you head straight for Broad Street and don’t look back.” I looked at Mountain and he just turned around toward the bar without any hint of involvement.

(Thanks for that, by the way.)

What none of these good people could know was that there were people who hated me every bit as much as Rashid did on the other side of Broad Street. The only difference was, they wore my same skin color. What these good people



didn't know was that among these haters were some cops. For me, in a peculiar way, I felt more at ease, more accepted, in that neighborhood than I did in some of the neighborhoods around school. The two guys in a pickup truck who threatened to kill Joanie and me with a shotgun; the kids outside the fast food joint who surrounded our car and tried to turn it over; the old woman who told me, "In my time we didn't even allow niggers on this street," were all white. The people who refused to take my order, give me service, or accept my money, were all white. I didn't have time to explain this to them. And I was fairly certain they wouldn't believe me if I told them, but I felt less nervous in their bar at night than I did walking down Floyd Avenue in broad daylight, where a guy once took a pot shot at me from his front porch. No, the other side of Broad Street was no comfort to me. Calvin once suggested jokingly that if I ever got in trouble in his neighborhood, I should announce loudly that I'm a descendant of Warren G. Harding. I was pretty sure that advice wouldn't help me in any way on *our* side of Broad.

We walked outside and Calvin headed off toward his grandmother's house. I started heading toward Broad Street. I'd never felt so ridiculous, nor so scared, in all my life. After I'd gone half a block, nervous, very very very alone, a dog came bounding out of an alley and paced himself beside me. I stopped. The dog stopped. He looked up at me wagging his tail. Then another dog appeared—they were both wagging their tails. Suddenly I was engulfed in milling dogs. Dogs were all over the place leaping and snorting and greeting me. I knew what that meant. I walked back a few strides and looked down the

alley. There, under the streetlight, I saw Amos ambling slowly toward me with his walking stick—all quiet dignity and gentle good-nature.

“Chou doin’ down in here, Charles, down in the quagmire?”

“Visitin’ a friend,” I said nervously.

“Well now, he cain’t be much of a friend to lead you all down into this here. Cost a white man his life. You better stick with me and the hoid.” Amos called his hounds ‘the herd’.

“I’m truly glad to see you Amos,” I said eagerly.

“Yeah, well, you should be. Was Speckles who sniffed you out. Thanks goes to that nose of his. Smell a bitch through three-inch cold-rolled steel...” Amos suddenly took my arm and started leading me. “Don’t look. Just keep walkin’,” he said quietly.

I looked around and startled. We were being followed; an old low-slung Chevy was behind us, rolling so slowly we could hear the grit being crushed under its tires.

When we arrived at the corner of Broad Street, the car took a left turn, swerving so closely in front of us that we could have reached in the open window. The four young toughs inside were all looking directly at me, and not in the most kindly manner—as they drifted slowly by.

“Don’t look at ‘em, they tryin’ to give you the stank-eye,” Amos instructed. But I couldn’t help myself. I was riveted. The big block-headed guy at the wheel was staring regally at the street ahead. Next to him was Jerome, leaning his weasel face back over the top of the seat to fix me with his

cold yellow eyes. In back, two skinny looking kids, dressed in black with black rags wrapped around their heads, stared at me menacingly.

“Welcome to my neighborhood,” said Amos quietly.

## SWIMPS

When we finally arrived safely at the park, five blocks away, ten years, ten months, ten weeks, and ten or twelve excruciating minutes later, Amos sat down wearily. “We come a long way just now together,” he said and shooed the dogs off. They disappeared like ships into a fog bank, except for a little wire-haired white one which stayed around, laying at Amos’ feet with his head on his paws. We sat there for a bit, quietly. Then Amos said, “Tell you a little story.”

I waited while he shifted around on the bench for a long time, and then cleared his throat a dozen times or more, and then rubbed his face with his hands for a bit. I waited, because I knew this was sometimes his way. He cleared his throat again.

“I was a jazz musician. For a long time I was a jazz musician; but you didn’t know that did you?” He smiled revealing his own gold front teeth. I thought it strange that suddenly so many people in my life had gold front teeth—those who meant me harm and those who arrived like angels out of the darkest alley to comfort me.

“You played jazz?”

“The disciplinarian’s blues is what they sometimes referred to it as.”

“Blues?”

“Yeah, it’s blues! You don’t know jazz is blues? It’s all blues, man!”

Though blues would play a big part in my life somewhere down the road, at that point in time I knew nothing about blues. It spoke to me, but I didn’t know it was blues speaking. It called me, but I didn’t pick up the phone.

“What instrument did you play?”

“I’d like to lie and say sax, but that ain’t true. Be more cool, but not a bit more true. I’ll save that for the womens. Even guitar would be better many believe,” he sighed, “but no, I played the drums.”

“Nothin’ wrong with drums,” I said.

“No, nothin’ wrong with the drums, but you know what they say...”

I didn’t. But, I wanted to. So, I waited.

I waited until it began to look like I was never gonna know what they say.

“What do they say?” I finally asked.

Amos seemed lost in thought. “Oh, well, you know, they say a good drummer is hard to find and a bad drummer is hard to get rid of.”

I nodded as if I understood. I mean, I nodded as if I’d heard him.

“I must of been a pretty good drummer though, cause they seldom found me. Far as I can tell, I’m still lost.” He laughed a dry little laugh, coughed a little, and then he drifted off in thought again. He sighed. “Still I made my living that way. Some can’t say as much.”

“It sounds like a good way to make a living.”

“Yeah, it does-must look good from the outside. Hard work though, luggin’ them pots an’ pans around. Still, I had my good times. I had my share. Yes, yes, livin’ THE life.”

“What did you do?”

“Spotin’ mostly.”

“Spo-tin?”

“Ballin’, you know, carryin’ on, jackass behavior...gettin’ with the womens.”

Later I understood he'd said *sportin'*; women and minor drugs with a little gamblin' thrown in, occasional fights. "I believe I had me my share. Yes indeed I did. You know I did." He started nodding his head to a beat that I could not hear. "But anyway," he sighed, "I wanted to tell you this little incident, when I was playin' with Coon Collins—you prolly never heard of him; real jazz musician; black jazz, hot jazz, real Southern jazz. Played with him all over this never-mind. Coon Collins and his get-up-if-you-still-can quartet. Coon and me were old buddies, old army buddies really, and that devil, Coon, he knew that I could not say...uh...you know," he paused, gulped, "*swimps*." "SWIMPS?"

He struggled to come up with the word. "Shimps. Swimps, you know them curly thangs."

"Curly things. What are you..? Is it a musical term? I mean what is it?"

"A thang you eat. It's a kind of fishy thang that crawls along the bottom I think. You know, like a crawdad, but not one" He shook his head. "Now I hesitate to even try... SWIMPS. Surely you mus' know...Please help me." "Shrimp?"

"Yeah, Coon, he knew that I could not, if the Devil himself was on my tail, say that word. So, ever time we found ourselves in Nawlins, as they call it; when we was in Orleans, as I called it, he always takin' me to this place where all they serve up is swimps. Even the 'ssert was swimps; swimps custard, swimp soufflé, somethin' horrible like that." He laughed. "don't get me wrong I love t'eat 'em, just can't call 'em by name."

Amos was grinning, thinking about it. “What you gonna have, Billy?’ ‘Why I believe I’ll have me a big platter of them fried swimps.’ ‘Bout you, Horn Player?’ ‘Ummmm, those barbecued swimps sure look good to me.’ ‘And, you Amos..?’ So then there was that silence, you know. They all waitin’. They can’t wait to see my acrobatics.” Amos slapped his thigh and bowed his head in laughter. He started coughing, and coughed for a long time before continuing. “Ever body in the place seemed to be waitin’ for me to attempt the impossible. Talk about perfect time for a drum roll.” Amos was laughing so hard he started coughing again. “They knew I could not say that word. They all knew it. My boys knew it. Waitress, she knows it too. She seen me in there enough times; she’s standin’ there waitin’, pencil at the ready. ‘I guess I’ll just have whatever Billy’s havin.’ And they would crack up.” Amos began laughing so hard that he started wheezing. “You can’t say shrimps?” “Still can’t, no.”

There were tears in Amos’ eyes when he looked at me and he was beaming with a schoolboy delight. “Had me a friend, Bad Boy Big Billy Murdock—horn player from out of Memphis—tryin’ to secretly educate me, give me instruction, whenever we met up. We tried breaking that word down into three parts and that didn’t work. We tried enunciating exercises that involved every word in the book that looked, moved or smelled like swimpses, but that did not work.” He looked at me, “Go ahead an’ laugh. Old black man can’t say swimps; the very essence of humor.” It was kind of funny and I did laugh.

“But, that’s the point, Charlie...if there is a point. What we went through tonight...down the road, that’ll make a good story; time you went into the Jubi and come out with your skin still on. One piece. Uncut!”

“I’m still frightened,” I admitted.

“You’d be a fool if you wasn’t. Hell, man, I’m frightened too. Dogs was frightened. But, I know you, you’re clever, and in time, it’ll make a good tale. You’ll prolly end up beatin’ the black off Jerome or Rashid X or whatever it is he calls himself these days...been nothin’ but trouble since he was a kid...in time you’ll be puttin’ your foot right through his skinny black ass. In time it’ll evolve that way in the tellin’, you’ll see.” We sat there on the bench laughing about it, but my eyes were on Harrison Street looking for that car.

“Don’t worry. They won’t come up in here,” he said and patted me on the thigh. “They won’t come up this side a Broad. How’d you get into that fix anyway?”

“A friend took me there.”

“Oh that’s right, you done already told me that.” He sat, pondered. “Some friend.”

A really peculiar little note (nonetheless true):

In 1988 (so that’s like 20 years after this event) I was in a little blues dive called Larry Blake’s, in Berkeley California, one night when Lonnie Brooks was playing there. In between sets the bass player takes the mic. and he tell us this very same tale, almost note for note. Only difference was, he called ‘em shimps. He can’t pronounce *shimps*, the band knows he can’t pronounce *shimps* and, whenever they’re in ‘Nawlins’, they make a point of taking him to a place where everything on the menu is *shimps*. I almost fell off my chair. As Amos once told me, It’s funny how life works itself out.



### **SOME, You Know, DEALING, nothing big**

Howard had this thing—which I never really entirely understood—where suddenly he felt compelled to get a job. Nobody I ever met could land a good-paying job as quickly as Howard. While I knew him he'd been (albeit briefly) a medical technician, a photo lab specialist, a *space* salesman for a local television station, and a grant proposal writer for a non-profit that took care of latch-key kids. Howard explained that he qualified for none of these positions—some of them he didn't even understand—but that was not the point. The point seemed to be that once he was hired it would take the company a certain length of time to discover that he couldn't do the work and then, a certain number of weeks to get rid of him; by that time he'd have what he wanted. And I was never really sure what that was. It had to do with specific calendar dates and *unemployment*.

One time he assured me, calmly, not smugly, that he could pick up a job *whenever* he wanted. The process was simple: fill out the application with the kind of things that the employer wanted to see. How he knew what those things were I don't know. But, it seemed to work for Howard. Most of the year he could be found out on the street or sitting in the park or playing chess on the front steps of his apartment building. He was living proof that the system worked... for those who knew how to work the system. But, Howard was not only playing the system, apparently, he was beating the system, and living a pretty good life. Meanwhile, I was working in the college cafeteria for less than \$4/ hr. This is just one of the thirty-two trillion things in this life that I will never understand.

I was playing chess with Howard on the steps of the Grove Avenue apartment building where he lived along with the southern branch of Motorcycle Morons MC. I was probably doing my usual job of it—feeling unreasonably confident into mid-game—when Howard asked casually, “Oh, how would you like to make three hundred dollars?” That was the equivalent of asking me if I would like to win the lottery.

“Well, sure. What do I gotta do?”

“You go down to a place I tell you to go, and a guy will give you a package. You take the package to the address he tells you and the guy who takes the package from you will hand you \$300 cash. It’s yours.” Howard shrugged.

“How far between the place I pick this thing up and the place I drop it off?”

“Three blocks,” he said. “It’s right over here on N. Harvie. Three hundred dollars...” he urged. “You want to do it?”

“But, Howard, I don’t get it. I go somewhere and pick up a package and I deliver it to a guy three blocks away and he hands me three hundred dollars?”

Howard said nothing, but, he took my queen.

“Howard, why didn’t you tell me to guard my queen?”

“Do you want the job or not?”

“It’s a courtesy, Howard,” I said, taking one of his knights, “I don’t understand why the guy doesn’t just go and pick it up himself.”

“Check,” said Howard. “You want the job or not?”

“Why don’t *you* do it?” I interposed a pawn.

Howard just blew out steam and shrugged as if to say, Me?...for a mere three hundred bucks? And then he said,

“Checkmate.”

“When do I have to do this?”

“You can do it right now.”

“I pick up a package and deliver it three blocks away and the guy hands me three hundred dollars and that’s all mine to keep?” I really couldn’t believe it.

“Yes,” Howard was becoming bored with my density.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,” he said, answering any further questions I might have in advance.

“That’s a hundred dollars per block.”

“DO YOU WANT the job?”

“Can I go home first and get some stuff?”

“Be quick about it.”

I had no idea what might have been in that package, but I’m not an idiot. I thought the best thing to do would be to attire myself like a painter—which I was—so as not to attract any undue attention while delivering this package. So that’s how I ended up walking down Grove Avenue with a large stretcher over my shoulder—my usual thing—and a bag full of various jars of paint—also typical behavior for me, and carrying a paper bag with who knows what in it to a guy who opened the door, said nothing, took the bag, looked in it, and handed me **THREE HUNDRED** dollars **CASH**. (Three **HUNDred** Dollars **CASH**!)

I still don’t know how that worked.

As I write this I’m more than 60 years old and I guess I must be as naïve as I was back then; I still don’t know why the delivery guy should walk with \$300. Back then, I didn’t care. I lived off that \$300 like a king for months; it was, after all, the equivalent of about 10 months’ rent.

Despite the monumental nature of that windfall I never did such a thing again. For one thing, Howard never offered again, but for another, it just didn't seem worth it to me. That was the longest 10 minutes I ever spent in my life and three of the longest blocks I ever wobbled along weak-kneed.

## NOT A CALF

After that weird little windfall I had a pocketful of cash and a little time to think about things. So, I went over to a little redneck diner where they actually served people of my sort. The woman who ran the place stared at me with icy eyes and never uttered a word as she took my order. By this method she made it clear she didn't like me but she had no objection to my money. That was an acceptable arrangement for me in those days. These days I don't deal with anyone I don't want to see prosper. So, it's a bit awkward for me looking back to discover that that redneck behind the counter was more open minded than I am now. She listened to my order and did her thing and placed the bill in front of me and took my money and gave me my change and put the two dogs and the carton of milk in a bag and turned her back to me. Not a word had been spoken during all that, but volumes had been conveyed. (Mimes could have learned a great deal in that joint.)

I was on my way home with my two dog lunch when I saw Slim slumped over on one of the park benches. It was another rare daylight sighting. He was becoming a regular 9 to 5 guy. Like a magnet with a learning disorder, I was drawn.

"Are you OK?"

"I'm not feelin' too good."

"Can you eat?"

"I don't want to waste my money on that stuff."

"No, no, I got you something right here. I got you a hot dog over at Harold's Diner."

"I bet that fat woman sliced them dogs down the middle and dumped 'em in the deep fryer." I was astonished. "She

always does it. She's been doin' it that way since the beginning of time. She's been there for thirty years." He looked up at me and I could see that he was wracked in pain of some sort.

"You look like a cowboy," he said.

"A cowboy!" I laughed. "What the heck..."

"Cowboy fella; squints and whispers; hit people in the face with frying pans and such."

"OK," I said. "I have NO idea what you are talking about.

"Me neither. But," he said after some thought, "You do. You do," he insisted, "You know the one. Drove a train into a bar; took on the entire Mexican Army with only a slingshot and the right to bear arms."

"OK," I said and reaching into the bag I pulled out the carton of milk. "Can you drink this?"

"Not a calf," he said.

"Try it," I said.

"I never liked it."

"It might do you some good."

"I don't like it. Never will."

"It might do you some good."

"I'll try but I want to get some real juice later, if my stomach can take this stuff. I'm in a lot of pain."

"Try it..."

"Don't like it, but I'll try."

He took the carton and was fumbling with it with his dirt-encrusted thumbs for so long that I took it back and opened it for him. Then he poured it in a single gulp down his throat, down the front of his chin, down his suit front. Then he held the empty carton in his lap and stared straight ahead for a while. "Still don't," he said.

That cracked me up. And, at that moment I was filled with tremendous compassion for this old guy. I mean, I liked him before. I mean, I thought he was a pretty good guy who somehow had gotten himself into a bad situation and no longer cared to get out, but, at that moment my heart went out to him. My eyes filled with tears and my jaw quivered a little as I looked at him sitting there with that empty milk carton in his lap.

"I'm pitiful," he said, and I had to agree, he was a pitiful sight.

"I'll take that," I said and, "How's about a dog?" I produced one of the dogs from the bag.

"I don't think I can do it. I've had enough until my stomach settles down."

"I'm gonna have one," I said, "Are you sure you don't want one?"

He looked at me coldly. "How old are you?"

"Almost twenty...or so."

"You think almost twenny or so is old enough to listen when I talk?"

"OK," I warned, "I'll eat them both then. I just thought you might want one. I know that sometimes you're hungry."

"Sometimes I am."

"Did you sit out here in the rain long the other night?" I asked while chewing on the dog. Just conversation between acquaintances.

"Long enough."

"I was up until 2:30 and you were still out here. I could see you from the window." I pointed out my window across Harrison Street.

"Don't do it. Don't ever come out here in the rain again."

"I didn't." I had wanted to, but I didn't.

"Don't ever."

"I won't."

"Or I'll stop teachin' you stuff."

"OK, I promise."

"Don't promise, just don't do it."

"Last chance on this hot dog before I eat it," I said, but he just stared at me.

After several minutes he said, "Mind if I talk?"

"That's what I'm here for." I said joyfully, and he just got up and walked away.

"See you later!" I shouted. But he just waved me off with a gesture of complete disgust and kept walking.

The hotdog was cold, but it tasted pretty good anyway.



## GRANDMA AND MOKE

Eventually I did meet Calvin's grandmother in her own home. It was late in the evening, several months later, and I don't recall how we ended up there but there I was face to face with his grandmother in her living room. She was short and bulky in a floral print dress with a long white lace apron. She had grey hair and pink glasses and a fixed faux smile. It was a little weird with her standing there the entire time with her hands on her hips smiling at me and talking out the side of her mouth to Calvin.

"Have you lost your mind, Calvin? What on God's green earth has possessed you bringing a white boy, and a hippie no less, into this house?"

"It's alright, Gram..."

"No it ain't! It ain't alright. It may be alright for you, but I LIVE in this here neighborhood."

"Gram..."

"Do NOT stand there, Calvin, and Gram me. Now, take your friend downstairs and do NOT leave until the sun has gone well down."

Downstairs we found Calvin's roommate slouched in a big chair with his feet up on a huge wooden coffee table. There was beer and dope on the table and when Calvin went out of the room to go to the bathroom his roommate addressed me.

"How's it feel being the only white face for miles in any direction?"

"It's OK."

"It is, huh? So, you give no credence to the theory that a white person who finds himself in the middle of the nigger

district in the middle of the damned night might find himself endangered?"

"Calvin's my friend. I think he..."

"I ain't your damn friend!" he snapped. "You ever hear the phrase, niggers with knives?"

"What...uh...yeah, sure."

"Well, it's true," he said and he produced a big bowie knife from out of nowhere and drove it, point first, into the table top. He leaned back into his chair, grinning, and said, "Niggers with knives. That has GOT TO BE your worse nightmare."

While I was trying to figure out what to say to that, Calvin returned and saw the knife, stuck deep into the table top. It was still quivering from the impact. He eyed his friend suspiciously and they both burst into laughter as they shook hands, employing a complicated 42 step process, reserved only for the very closest of friends.

Calvin said to me, "Moke been messin' with you?"

"Well..." I looked at the knife and hesitated.

"Moke, say you're sorry to Edward. He's a friend of mine."

"Nah. He knew I was playin' with him all along," said

Moke, "Didn't you, Edward?" He leaned forward and extended his hand. "Call me Moke."

"Moke," I repeated and shook his hand in a single stroke.

"Moke."

"Moke, as in 'What you been mokin' ?'" said Moke, and laughed.

"I KNOW what *you* been mokin'," said Calvin. They both laughed. "I can mell what you been mokin'. Where *is* the moke, Moke?"

Moke and Calvin and me smoked a little weed together, then we sat up all night jabbering about what they called *just a bunch of crazy-ass shit*.

I left, by myself, just about dawn.

When I was rounding the corner, turning toward home, heading toward the redneck part of town, there was an old black man, a homeowner, watering his perfectly maintained lawn, behind a short, freshly painted, pure white picket fence. He simply could not believe his eyes when he saw a long-haired white kid just strolling by. It may very well have been something he'd never seen before. He looked at me cautiously with huge eyes and froze in place. He said not a word, but he was keeping his eye on me.

I nodded and said, "Good morning."  
"Mornin', Suh," he said still dumbfounded by my presence on his block.

It really was a very nice little neighborhood, and I felt comfortable there. I always felt comfortable in Richmond at 5 a.m. At 5 a.m. I owned that town.

## A TAILOR OF GREAT SADNESS

The suit was a beautiful thing, a nice soft grey fabric with white chalk stripes—like gangsters and high-class lawyers wore in previous times. And it was my size. I mean, the jacket fit me perfectly, I assumed the pants would. It was \$3 I think. I don't know what I was doing in Goodwill, but there I was and there it was and if the gods had put a bullhorn directly to my ear the message couldn't have been clearer; this suit was meant for me. I had no use for a suit of course—no use whatsoever—but, you know, for three bucks I could wear it to paint in. Jeans cost \$6 in those days, good jeans were around \$10.

So, I bought the thing and brought it up to my little loft and hung it somewhere so I could look at it once in a while and dream of the day I would wear it.

One day, inspired by I don't know what, I decided that I'd better try on the pants. And, though they were long enough you could have put two of me in there at the waist. I spent a bit of time mulling over that, wondering about the shape of the guy who had originally owned the thing. (my first guess...potato...) But, I resigned myself to the fact that I'd just bought a suit coat, and that *that* was kinda cool in itself...pinstriped...

Weeks later, while on my way downtown to a place with painted windows I passed by a tailor's shop. Just out of curiosity I decided to go in. There were two ancient, you know, relatively speaking, men in there, each in white shirt and tie with rolled up sleeves, and they were talking quietly. The one behind the counter stopped, needle in mid

stitch, and took off his wire-rimmed glasses when I walked in. The one on my side of the counter swung around slowly on his stool and looked at me inquiringly. What on earth could this long haired kid in jeans want?

“Yes?”

“You’re a tailor?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you see, I bought this suit, you know, at Goodwill. And though the jacket fits perfectly, the pants are kinda big and...well, is there anything you could do about that?”

“That is possible.”

“How much would it cost to...I mean how much *do you think* it might cost to take in the waist...of the pants?”

“Take in is no problem. To let out; that’s another matter. But, take in...” He shrugged. He said something to his friend in a language I’d never heard before. His friend sputtered a bit and shrugged and said something back in one or two words.

“Bring me in these pants and I will see.”

“But, I need to know...well, you know, I need to know about how much. I need to know...if I can afford it. I’m not rich.”

The two old gentlemen both laughed at that. “Who is?”

They both nodded at the wisdom in that simple statement.

“You bring to me the pants and I will tell you how much.”

“Would it be more than \$10?”

“You bring in these pants. OK, for \$10 I will do this for you, could be maybe less.”

I RAN about thirty blocks. Fourteen blocks to my place—don't forget three flights of stairs up, don't forget three flights of stairs rapidly down, carrying pants—and sixteen or seventeen blocks back, to the tailor's shop. When I arrived he was in the midst of pulling down the shade in the front door, closing up.

"Come in, come in," he said bowing.

"I'm glad I made it," I huffed.

I noticed that the tailor's friend had left as I walked ahead and placed the pants on the counter. "These are the pants I told you about," I said, still huffing. He came around the counter and put on his glasses, lifted the pants toward a light.

"This," he said, "is a nice wool, a good wool. This is a very good wool."

"Can you take them in?...You said it would only cost like \$10."

"Yes. How much do they need taken in..." he mulled out loud.

I knew it was more of a question for himself, but I wanted to be a part of the social arrangement. I answered cleverly, "About a hundred miles I guess."

He took off his glasses and looked up at me. "The funny business...?" he said sharply. (He pronounced it piz-nez)

"You come here to make the funny business?!"

I could see that he was furious. I didn't know what I had done to upset him, but I wanted to apologize.

"I..."

"You!" he shouted, "You always coming again with the funny business."

“But, I...I’m...uh...”

He took my pants in a clump and thrust them toward me. “You will please leave my shop.” I took the pants. “You will be kind to leave my shop,” he said walking over to the door and holding it open for me.

I had no idea what I had done; whatever it was, I was deeply deeply sorry that I had done it. And, even now—I guess it’s been more than 40 years—when I think about that event, I ache with the desire to apologize to that man, maybe explain myself, fix that goddamned mess somehow.

I dropped the pants in a garbage can on the way home, never wore the suit coat. I think, eventually, I gave it back to Goodwill.

## REGGIE

That same year, for some reason which I could not comprehend, girls seemed to find me irresistible. I found them *absolutely* irresistible, but that wasn't new. What was new was, I had a little money. I had a few friends. I had a car. My work (writing) was moving along steadily, nicely, and I had gained some note as a painter. I was doing alright; for someone who didn't know what the heck he was doing, let alone why, I was doing alright. So, I thought I'd give a little back, as they say. I thought about it for a bit and then called an organization which puts fatherless boys together with young men so the kid might know what it's like to have a male figure in his life—someone who cared about him and set an example of what it was to be a man.

I had a phone put into my studio specifically so this organization could call me and, when my kid was assigned, I could call him. They sent me a packet with a brochure and some forms to fill out. I must admit I looked pretty good on paper. And before long I was assigned a kid; his name was Reggie. I was given his home phone number and another pamphlet to read, and told to talk to his grandmother, his guardian. Then I took a deep breath, picked up my new phone, and set up a date. The pamphlet stressed that I must prove myself reliable in the eyes of this kid. If I made a date with him to meet up and go somewhere, the most important thing on earth was that I kept that date. These kids had already had enough disappointment in their lives. If I wasn't willing or able to do that, the pamphlet urged me strongly to quit before meeting the kid and save everybody the sadness. But I was ready, willing, able and on top of it, I was eager.



So, after making arrangements, I drove over to the frightening little neighborhood where the kid was to meet with me and I parked my car out front and I went jauntily to the door and I knock knock knocked. An old black woman looked out through the crack that the chain bolt allowed and eyed me.

“Is Reggie here?”

“You the man from the organization?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” she hesitated, then opened the door enough for a skinny little black kid—he must have been 10 or 12—to slip through. He tugged on a baseball cap and stood there looking up at me, ready to go.

“When will you be bringing him home?” she asked from her safe position behind the door.

“I guess in about two hours.”

“TWO HOURS? No, no, no, no, you had better get him home ‘fore that, now.”

“I thought we’d go to the park and then maybe have some ice cream somewhere.”

“One or the other,” she said in a commanding voice. “You choose what y’all are gonna do together but you have him back here in an hour...and a half. OK? No more than that.”

She looked at a watch and tapped it with her finger. After she shut the door, I think both of us could still feel her presence behind it as we climbed into my car and drove off.

During the ride Reggie did not look directly at me even one time that I was aware of. From the glances I took of him, he was delighted to be going out. We talked a little and I asked him what he would like to do. He didn’t know, he didn’t care. He shrugged. I offered him the park and I offered him

ice cream, and ice cream was the resounding winner in an overwhelming landslide victory.

I'm not a political person, but I'm not completely unaware of the political pulse of our society either, and I made a kind of weird decision to go to a place where they had previously denied me service. By the time this event took place the working theory was that a freshly scrubbed, properly attired black person could now sit at a soda fountain just like your average big fat sweaty redneck in dung spattered overalls. We were about to test that theory. So, we drove right up to the Plantation Room just like we belonged there and we marched right in, just like everybody else, and the hostess looked at us as if something foul had been dragged in on someone's shoe.

Did I say there were brand new federal laws in place? She lead us, without a spoken word, to a booth. Reggie scooted into a seat and I scooched into the seat across from him. As he looked around, he saw only wonder; as I looked around, I saw only cold reality. People throughout the entire section were gawking. There was such a hum about the place that people in the adjoining rooms were standing up and craning their necks to discover what that vibration was about. I didn't know if it was because of the kid or because of my hair or the peculiar combo that we made up, but the good customers of that very fine establishment had no qualms whatsoever about staring. Little beady eyes squinted at us disapprovingly from round pink faces wherever I looked.

Reggie was oblivious to it all. He was delighted to be there. This was, after all, THE place where you'd go if you wanted the very best banana split you could get in all of Richmond. So, I managed somehow to talk him into having a banana split, and I somehow managed to talk myself into a chocolate malt. When the waitress came, she had nothing to say; just stood there with her pencil poised and waited. Somehow the very process of taking our order irritated her. I was jovial, but she was having none of it. After taking our order, she disappeared, martyr to a greater cause.

When the good stuff arrived it was dumped coldly upon the table and a bill was torn from a pad and slapped down on the tabletop face up. The message as I read it was, "Eat up, pay up, and get out." I didn't know whether the unspoken pronoun was nigger lover, or hippie, but we ate, and we enjoyed ourselves. As we ate, we talked a bit—though neither of us was much for talk—we talked. We talked about how good that ice cream was, and after checking to confirm, we had to admit that it was very good. For the entire time I was aware of the hatred beaming in our direction, but I'm absolutely sure he wasn't. (If I had thought for a moment that he noticed, I would have taken him by the hand and left that place.)

As said, we had a good time. But, when we were finished, instead of pushing it, I took the bill directly to the hostess and gave her the sum in round figures, and smiled as we walked out the door. "Boy, the air is sure fresh out here," I said to the kid as we stepped outside. He liked it too. After driving Reggie home, I went back to my place and collapsed.

The next day I called Reggie's grandmother wanting to set up a meeting for the coming week and she said, "Oh, you know, the fella down at the organization asked me to tell you to call him."

"The fellah at the organization wants me to call him?"

"That's what he said."

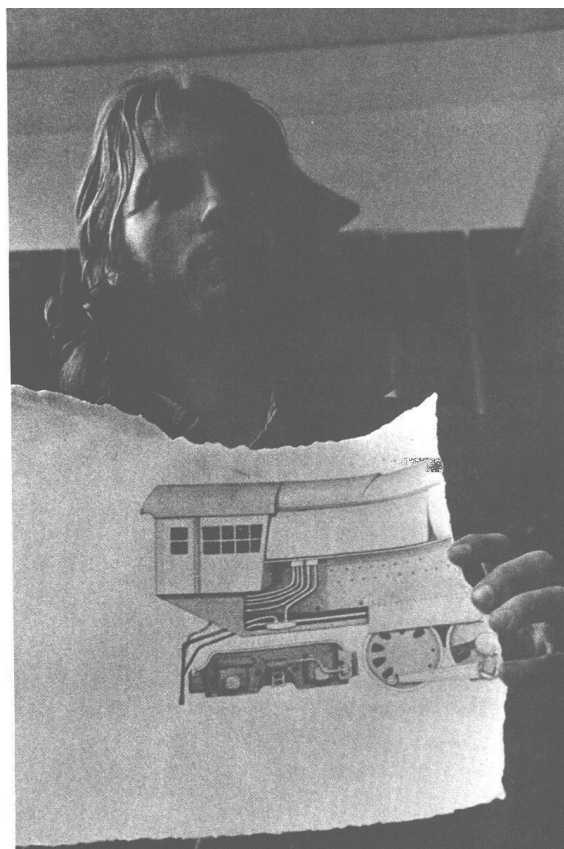
"Ok," I said, "I'll do that. But, what about next week?"

"I think you better call that man first."

So I called the fellah down at the organization and he told me that, well, you know, things being what they are and all, they really didn't need any more volunteers at the moment, and someone else, you know, another really well-qualified young man, had been waiting patiently to have a kid assigned to him and, you know, he'd been over-looked somehow, and he was sorry but he didn't think they would be needing me any further.

I never knew if it was because I was white, or because I had long hair, or because I took Reggie to that place, and that was seen as putting the kid in danger, but they could hardly admit to any of that. You couldn't say I hadn't been warned though; what dream had I been living in? My entire Richmond experience should have prepared me for this, but I was gutted.

After putting my foot right through a painting, I broke down into tears. In those days I did that sort of thing. Someday I hope to walk away from that phone conversation; meanwhile writing about this has been like opening an old wound.



## JANE

Jane worked in the college bookstore—a place in which I had never before set foot. I truly believed, with a bitter superior disdain, that I would never set foot in there. I had no use whatsoever for sweatshirts and book covers; and less use still for any thing emblazoned proudly with the RPI logo. Consequently, when I walked by the place I seldom looked inside, though, admittedly, I liked the team colors. On this particular day however, as I walked past the bookstore, innocent as a fawn (innocent as a sneering fawn), I noticed the girl behind the counter in much the same manner as a compass might notice magnetic North.

A more unlikely candidate for selling mugs to proud parents and sheep-like freshmen I cannot imagine. She was so far superior to the task that it was criminal. My god, when will this world ever begin to recognize natural nobility? Had I been in the position to place her, I'd have hired her for some more perfectly suited task: stretching out languidly upon a velvet divan, in a pure white room with eighteen foot ceilings and marble floors. The job would require her to sip from a very fine porcelain cup and, if she had the time, sigh occasionally. Or maybe I could find a place for her lounging in the shade of a willow tree somewhere at the edge of a river, wounding the pride of passing swans merely by her presence. Whatever the job, a necessary part of her task would be to fend off men of puffed up self-esteem as they flocked around. She'd have to ignore all the sidling, mincing and mewling, bending and bowing and scraping; dismiss the promises of eternal devotion and dedicated service with a kindly laugh; kill the hope of any chance to impress her with their carefully

wrought, over-worked lies, with a single knowing glance. I thought she'd be good at that.

Place Jane in any setting and the setting would take on a kind of elegance that it could not have held on its own. In this way, Jane was like a cat. In this way I was like a mouse.

Jane was trim and fine with nobly chiseled features. (Some might say skinny; I would say, who cares.) She was quietly, though not smugly, self-assured. She was self-assured in an open, playful way. She had dignity. She had a posture of a type which continues to slay me—you could drop a plumb line from the back of her lovely head and it would fall between her shoulder blades, just touching her little rump and continue down neatly, uninterrupted, to the back of her heels. Dark eyes. Sparkling eyes. Elfish eyes that took delight in every goofy child-like futile effort to dodge their knowing glance. (It's not a complete sentence, but so much more than a complete thought.)

Although it was not my habit, I found myself scoping her out, first from outside the bookstore, then from within. I took up a position at a table, pretending to look through stacks of sweatshirts. Oh, they do have them in extra large! Then, driven, drawn probably, by who knows what (and we can all surely guess), I approached the counter and asked her some dumb question about some dumb thing which I don't recall but didn't really care about anyway. She smiled, leaving me dumbstruck, and since no answer was really required, said nothing. If stammering can be done in utter silence, I stammered for a while.

As she looked at me, I looked at the floor, the countertop, the walls of the store, anywhere but at her. When I did get the courage to look up, her eyes fixed on me with the kind of sympathy any kind huntress might hold for any helpless creature standing dazzled before her. Willing victim, I stood there expectant and eager.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” she asked, “or just checking out the merchandise?”

Well, there you go. The way she said *merchandise* I knew that she knew what I was there for. She knew more than that though. She knew how to get to me; how to entrap me, how to hold me, how to make me jump. She knew things I didn’t know about myself, hadn’t guessed, and, really, honestly, didn’t care to know...wish I didn’t now know.

As I staggered out the door that bright afternoon, my mind was short circuiting. “Wow,” I thought. And that was pretty much the sum total of my thinking. As I stumbled out of that bookstore that very fine afternoon, *wow* was the only thing on my mind. I couldn’t get beyond that single vibrant thought. It raced recklessly through my system, bumping into my heart each time it made the circuit. I had never met a woman like Jane before. She was in complete control. She knew it. I knew it. We both knew it. We both liked it. At that moment there was nothing else.

Now, forty years after the fact, my lovely wife is convinced that Jane had hypnotized me. I’m not sure. Hypnotized? That’s kind of ridicu...well, perhaps. Why else would a shy, semi-ugly guy do what I was about to do? Why else would a supposedly devoted guy—devoted to a lovely,



sweet, wonderful and trusting Southern girl—do what I was about to do? Jane was like cocaine to me; no matter how vulgar or stupid or wrong it was, it all seemed really kinda, you know, OK. Can I have another little hit? With Jane, I was like a puppy, trusting, eager to please, longing, aching to be obedient. Pee in my hat? I'd be delighted. Put it on backward? Why not?

From the beginning, it was like one of those bad movies where the two are so much in love that verbiage of any sort is completely unnecessary. When Jane did speak it had enormous influence on me; on my thinking, on my actions. Here are some of the most influential words I can recall her using: "I get off work at 4:30, are you going to be around?" No natural force on earth could have kept me from placing my head on that block. "I'll be right outside that door," I said—grinning like the fool that I was—and at ten after four I was. That actually does sound a bit like hypnotism doesn't it? She got into my mind, my heart, my bed without the use of speech. Once inside, Jane taught me things—strange things, frightening things—without uttering a word. If you can explain it to me, I'd be interested in hearing what you have to say. For me, it's like the pyramids: they're there, they're monumental, they're a little frightening sure, but oh so inspiring. Who cares to know more?

When we first arrived at my room above the Laundro-Mat, I stammered my way through my most impressive, rote, explanation of my paintings, as she looked on with bright sympathetic disinterest. Enough play. Shortly she had me sitting cross-legged on the floor facing her. Then, she

pulled a record from her large pouch-like purse and placed it on my record player. I admired the grace of her movements, the cold lines of her body were pleasing to my eye. When she settled on the floor directly across from me and closed her eyes, I reluctantly closed my own. After several long uncomfortable moments of silence I began, at long last, to feel something other than completely ridiculous. As best as I can describe it...this is what transpired. (I'll try to get you through this quickly because it sounds like such goddamned nonsense.)

I'd read Ouspensky. I'd read Allen Upward. I'd read Marie Corelli. I'd read Mr. Natural. I knew something about esoteric, Eastern, and idiotic thought. And although I know these sincere people, each and every breathy one of them, had been engulfed by countless glowing spheres, I had never been engulfed by a glowing sphere before. I'd never been engulfed by anything that I could recall. I'd never even seen a glowing sphere before. Nor did I have expectations of ever seeing one. So, it was new to me. When Jane came to my room this was not what I had expected. I don't know what I had expected, but having a pure white sphere appear above me, grow brighter, descend and engulf me entirely, wasn't it. (Insert raucous laughter here. But a word of caution: withhold some knee-slapping for later.)

Then, of course, naturally, what else (*naturally?*), the sphere took me above my physical body. I found that I could look down and see myself sitting there cross-legged like an idiot, inactive and inarticulate. It was a perspective I'd never had before. I could see why people had always

admired the waviness of my hair though. I had a nice head of hair. I could see Jane sitting on the wooden floor across from me. Her hair was nice as well. There I was hovering in this sphere of light a couple feet above Jane and my own shucked-out self, and feeling, quite properly I suppose, disoriented. Suddenly I became flooded with fear. In the Spanish language they have a phrase for what I felt—Aye-yi-yi-yi-yi! Immediately, laugh if you will, I snapped back into my physical body. (This may sound like nonsense, but, like everything in this book, it's nonsense of a 100% completely true sort.)

Jane was laughing (perhaps much like you are laughing right now) knowingly. She was smiling in a Cheshire cat like manner (check a mirror to see what that may look like). I guess I looked frightened; I was, actually, kind of...truly. I didn't know what to make of any of that. As said, I'd read about such stuff. I knew what I HAD thought about such stuff. I had thought it was improbable at best, perhaps a kind of child-like wishful thinking. After having experienced it, I didn't know any more than I had going in, though I suspected that IN was where I had gone. "What just happened?" she asked, smiling nicely at me. Not entirely a fool, and having read my share of detective novels, I replied smartly, "You tell me."

Jane then described to me exactly, EXACTLY, point by point, what had happened. She described the sphere, how it came down and gulped me up, how it rose taking me with it. She described me looking down and becoming frightened. It was precisely what I'd experienced. Things were becoming even more interesting. There was certainly

more to Jane than those eyes, those eyes, those eyes, those eyes, those eyes and those lovely eyes.

"How do you know that?" I asked astounded.

"I saw you. I was there. You didn't see me?"

"Nope." I was dumbfounded.

Going in, I felt, you know, like I'd never met anyone like her before but, now I knew, I had NEVER met ANYONE like Jane before.

"...and when I saw you get frightened and come back, I thought I'd come back to comfort you, if you needed it. Do you?"

"You were there?"

"Do you?"

"You were really there...uh...out there?"

"How do you explain it otherwise?" (Hypnotism, my wife whispers over my shoulder.)

"I don't know," I said. I was anxious to do it again, whatever it was that we'd done.

At the same time, I was also fearful of it. I'd only heard of such things before from the mouths of morons, and not just common morons either, but highly respected morons; morons who had published many books and had large devoted followings. Now, without making any declarations, I found myself a believer in the extraordinarily unlikely but unquestionably real. Nonetheless, I sure as hell wasn't going to tell anybody about this...least of all Joanie. Concerning that, Jane said, "You must realize that if you tell anyone about this, they won't understand." That was pretty easy to believe.

Wherever it was I had just been, I wanted to go there again. I wanted to see if the experience was reproducible.

That was the beginning. I had not yet cheated on Joanie, but I wanted to and I hoped to and I didn't see what I could do to prevent it. Given the chance, I wouldn't do anything to stop the betrayal, I wouldn't hesitate. I was helpless. It didn't even occur to me that I could either quit or turn back. I knew what I was doing. I'd had experience with that sort of thing before. One gear. No brakes. Worth whatever it might cost.

We met two times more. The first went pretty much the same as before. This time she demonstrated seating the tip of my tongue into the roof of my mouth. I did and attained the outward state readily. This time I saw a sphere of light hovering near me and knew, or convinced myself, that it was Jane. When I came back into my body, she was smiling. I was shaking with delight. I wanted to follow Jane where ever in this universe she might lead me. I could hear cars outside driving along Harrison Street and that made me laugh out loud. "THEY think those cars are real," I said. "Those cars are their reality," she told me. "Ha ha," I laughed, "poor them."

I thought about what I had just said, and what it meant, in my own empty-headed way, and drew no conclusions. I smiled knowingly though; it seemed like the thing to do. Again she cautioned me: "If you tell anyone about this, they won't believe you. What you now know to be true, others are incapable of understanding; they'll say you're loopy or you have an over-active imagination or that drugs

have overthrown your mind. You can expect that.” I knew she was right, and I kept quiet about my meetings with Jane for many reasons, none of them pure.

On our third encounter I proved myself to be without ethics of any sort whatsoever, when Jane crawled into bed with me. I was laying there, surrounded in white light, when there was a knock on the door. Joanie’s sweet, lovely, lyrical voice called my name. Jane and I froze. We lay there rigid, frozen in complete silence. Joanie knocked and called my name again. After a terrible and excruciatingly long silence she knocked again. “Edward?” she said weakly, “Why won’t you open the door?” I said nothing. Jane said nothing. We held each other tight, breathlessly. “Edward?” Joanie pleaded. I really wished at that moment that I’d be struck dead rather than hear her trembling voice again. After a pause, Joanie took flight down the stairs. I heard Mrs. See open her door on the second floor and look out and ask, “Bill?”

Jane and I had remained fixed, entwined, unmoving, listening, horrified as Joanie first guessed, then could no longer deny, that the young man she’d allowed herself to love, to trust, at that moment, was in the very act of betraying her. We listened petrified as she ran crying down the steps, then Jane got up quickly, dressed and left as she had come, without a word.

I never saw her again...never even caught a glimpse of her, on the street or anywhere else. It was as if she had removed herself from this planet entirely.

Unfortunately, Jane did not, like most hypnotists, have the courtesy to suggest to my malleable mind that when I awoke from this nightmare all would be forgotten. I realize now—while writing this—that it never will be.

## **SOMETHING BETTER TO DO**

In those days we were always returning home with the sunrise. I don't know what we did; talked mostly, smoked a little dope and talked. Drank some wine. Laughed too. Laughed a lot. Sometimes a single word would set us off. We'd be sitting around listening to music (there was always music), gazing blankly at each other, and someone would utter a word and we'd all be snorting and rolling around on the floor holding our sides. That's the way I remember it anyway. (Admittedly, others may harbor more dignified memories.) We were a good-natured lot. No animals were harmed in the making of this life.

So, one morning after such a night Ginger was on her way home alone. She was passing a lovely little house with pristine white picket fencing all around and willow trees which overhung the sidewalk (I'm sure there were flowers involved too), when a young black kid—post pubescent—came out of the lovely little cobblestone alley and climbed on Ginger's back. He clung to her like a rhesus monkey while he rubbed himself against her. Ginger managed somehow to shrug him off and then she turned to face the kid. She wasn't furious, however she was perturbed by the kid's strange animal behavior. "Haven't you got anything better to do?" she asked her assailant somewhat peevishly.

The kid was surprised by Ginger's reserve. We've all been surprised by Ginger's reserve at one time or another. He looked at her, agape, not knowing precisely what to do next. For a moment it looked like he was going to offer an apology. He paused. He thought. Then he shrugged a goofy kind of shrug, turned and ambled away, down the alley out



of which he'd sprung. Ginger watched him for a bit then continued on her way home to get some sleep.

I don't remember precisely when this story came to me, but it wasn't immediately; Ginger just didn't feel it required that sort of attention. Maybe a couple of days, maybe a week later, she mentioned it to Rick when they were passing by the same lovely little alley one day, and Rick pointed the spot out to me sometime later when we were going by that way. It was a particularly idyllic location for such an event. From Rick's description, I had already pictured it clearly, even the flowers. And, because I knew her, I could hear Ginger's calm but scolding manner—I could see her standing there with her hands on her hips as she looked the poor misguided youth right straight directly and unflinchingly in the eye. *Haven't you got anything better to do?* It was a good question.

Ginger was feminine in every way...a warm womanly makes-her-own-bread kind of creature. She was a romantic but of the straight-forward cold-eye-on-reality sort. Of course, I don't know what I'd do if someone jumped out of an alley and climbed on my back and started dry-humping me as the rising sun filtered down on me through a lovely leafy-green willow tree, in the languid residential morning streets of Richmond. That's why I admired Ginger. Her response was eloquent and dignified. Also, I think it allowed the kid the opportunity to re-think his attitude concerning women, without embarrassing himself too much. Ginger handled the peculiar event perfectly. I could not invent such a heroine.

## WALTER DUNBAR

I was sitting in a café, slumping in my chair, sighing, rolling my eyes heavenward in a saintly manner, exuding the kind of dark anguish that only a healthy young not bad-looking, middle-class white boy reading Yeats can exude, when an old middle-class white guy appeared before me in a porkpie hat. He touched the back of the chair across from me, and said, "Mind if I sit down?" He waited a bit before adding, "I know you were hoping one of them would be asking." He cocked his head in the direction of a bevy of young beauties.

I shrugged. He sat.

"Just curious," he said, "but what business are you in that allows you to hang around here all day looking disheveled and miserable?"

"Student," I said bitterly, "but, I'm really a writer." I added quickly.

"Oh? What kind of things do you write?"

"Fiction."

He snorted. "You must have the world by the tail! Why so miserable?"

"I just found out someone I really liked when I was a kid has died." It was a lie. I had decided that morning that, for that day at least, I would lie to everyone I talked to. I wanted to see how that worked out for a change; Honesty had failed me catastrophically. I thought being purposefully dishonest would be easier than exploring my own disgrace.

We sat for a bit, saying nothing. What could I say? It was kind of awkward just sitting there, so, when the girl brought his cappuccino I spoke.

“What business are you in that lets you sit around here all day drinking cappuccinos?”

“Don’t I look retired?”

“You do.”

“Well, mystery solved. You look like a miserable kid who’s lost his best friend—and you turn out to be just that. I look like a perfectly content retired guy—and that is what I turn out to be.” We both laughed. “I was a welder for forty years, now look at these paws, soft as a baby’s ass.”

‘Must be a matter of perspective,’ I thought looking at the bulky yellowed leathery mitts he held up for my inspection.

“Say,” he said suddenly, “you recall a guy back in Wisconsin who built a 16 foot speedboat in his basement—what we used to call a speedboat—?”

“I did hear a story like that. I thought it was an airplane...it was in his living room, wasn’t it?”

“Hell no. Goddamn it.” He slammed the table with one huge baby-soft fist, rattling the cups. “I’d like to wring his goddamned neck. That dumb bastard with the airplane was ten year later. I’m talking about a hand-crafted, mahogany speedboat with a 130 horsepower Chrysler inboard. I’m talking about 1954, Goddamn it.” I cringed. After all, I was just pretending to be a social creature.

“I was five years old at the time,” I explained meekly.

“Oh hell, it doesn’t matter anyway. You still managed to screw it up, didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry...” I didn’t know what I was apologizing for but I’d been brought up to apologize for any discomfort I might cause any amiable stranger who sits down across from me uninvited, wearing a porkpie hat.

“It was supposed to go like this:” he said, “You remember a guy who built a 16 foot speedboat in his basement and couldn’t get it out? Then you laugh and say, ‘Yeah, what a dumb son-of-a-bitch!’ And I go, ‘That dumb son-of-a-bitch was me.’ See, it’s a joke?”

“A joke?”

“As much as anything is. I’m the guy who did that.”

I was kind of confused. Slim made more sense than this guy. I didn’t know what to say. So, I waited.

“You’re supposed to ask me why I did that. Goddamit, son,” he said with sympathetic passion, “conversation is a craft.” He rattled the dishes again.

“Oh. OK. Why did you do that? Why did you build a 16 foot speedboat in your basement knowing you’d never be able to get it out of there?”

“THAT,” he said, pointing at me and taking a sip of coffee, “is a very good question.” He winked and said, “Thank you, by the way. Here,” he said, and after digging around in his wallet, removed a neatly folded old newspaper clipping and tenderly unfolded it. “Take a look at this.”

I stared at the photograph of a young man in overalls grinning proudly beside a boat that, indeed, seemed to be housed in a concrete block room. “Here, let me read it to you,” he said and I surrendered the clipping. “Walter Dunbar—that’s me—just recently completed the work on this beautiful home-built 16 foot mahogany inboard speedboat. The project took more than three years and cost over \$3000.’ That was a chunk of cash back then. ‘What’s special about Mr. Dunbar’s boat is that he constructed it in his basement, and the only way to get it out and onto the

water would be to dismantle the house. The good-natured Mr. Dunbar told this reporter, 'If the basement ever leaks, I'm ready.'

He began to laugh. "See? That's me, the good-natured Mr. Dunbar. That's me; that's my boat. That's the goddamned basement."

"That's crazy," I said.

"Pinch yourself; you're awake all right."

"Why did you do that?"

"A man has to do something with his time."

"Did you think you'd be able to get it out of there, when you started?"

"See, now you're cookin'...Hell no," he said smugly, "I don't even like the water. But you have to understand the times. Everybody had a boat in those days. If you didn't have one, they thought you were a communist. So, I wanted one, just like the next fellah, but I didn't want it to be just like the next fellah's. So, I designed it, built it plank by plank, right there in the goddamned basement. Hell, I was on TV!"

"Amazing."

"Yeah Art Linkletter himself interviewed me."

"Art Linkletter?"

"Yep, Art Linkletter himself...and DO NOT ask me who Art Linkletter is."

"OK. So what happened to the boat?"

"Another good question. Thank you again. See, now you're learning." He took a sip of coffee and waved at the woman behind the counter to bring us both whatever we were having. "I thought it was a great idea, until we tried to sell the house. We found it pretty-goddamned-near impossible

to find anyone that thought it added much to the value. My God, I'd say, there's a THREE THOUSAND DOLLAR hand-crafted mahogany speedboat in your basement! But they couldn't see it."

"Sheep," I snarled.

"Hell, I thought for sure *someone* would be glad to have the thing."

"Conversation piece..." I offered.

"There you go," he said. "You betcha. Somethin' for the neighbors to talk about. But, it didn't turn out that way. In the end it was either disassemble my glorious boat or take a loss on the house. I couldn't see myself taking a crowbar to something I'd worked on for nearly four years, not to mention the 3000 smackers." I waited. "Eventually we dropped the price of the house. I guess the guy who bought it from us destroyed my boat. What a circus."

"That would be hard to live with," I said.

The good-natured Walter Dunbar was laughing quietly and shaking his head. "Actually, now that I'm more forgetful, I find that I'm also a lot more forgiving. For years I hated that bastard...guy who bought the house. I felt like killing him. Truly, the arguments for and against were carefully weighed." He sat and thought for a while. "I was going to drive by there and take a peek into the basement, and if the boat was gone, I was going to ring the bell and kill the guy on the spot." He laughed. "Look, I'll give you a little free advice," he said, "Don't EVER build a boat in your basement."

"OK, I won't," I said.

"Promise me," he said, "You'll save yourself a lot of trouble."

"I promise."

“The guy who built that plane in his living room—you can forget about him too; he’s nothin’ more than a goddamned copy cat. Stupid bastard named Harnett or something... What was that son-of-a-bitch’s name? Harnett, Harnott? It doesn’t matter, I started it all in 1954, in Three Rivers. Maybe it was Barnett?” Walter Dunbar raised his cup to salute himself. I raised mine.

“This is wonderful. I’ve never met anyone like you before,” I said.

“Well, your luck is changing. Hell of a lot better than fiction, ain’t it? We get enough fiction from the boys in Washington. What we need is more real life.”

We both sat there for awhile thinking about real life.

The man was re-reading a twenty-year-old newspaper article about himself which he’d probably read a thousand times before, and enjoying it. I was enjoying watching his enjoyment.

“Anybody ever invented a story like that and nobody’d believe it,” he said. It’s too crazy for fiction. But it’s not too crazy for real life is it?” He started to get up in order to leave. “What’d you say your name was, young man?”

I paused for one second. “Walter,” I said.

“I think I can remember that one,” Walter Dunbar said.

“Nice to meet you, Walter.” He extended his hand. We shook. So, now I was Walter.

## **SLIM AND THE CHEVY**

One fine afternoon, Slim and I were holding down the opposite ends of a bench in the little park that we may as well have owned. We were kings that day. We could have each had our own private bench, but...noblesse oblige...we bowed to each other's highness. So, I had my arms thrown up over the back of my side in a manner that declared my ownership of that bench and everything around it as far as the eye could see. Yes, the bricks that lay below our feet, the hedges behind, the sky above, all fell within our realm. Slim was sitting there somewhat less possessively but no less regally in a baggy old blue serge suit. (Actually I have no idea what serge is.) We were monarchs, he and I, true royalty; a self-proclaimed artist and a self-admitted bum, social outcasts both, both kings. The sky was a wonderful, clear blue; there was only the slightest, cooperative breeze, blowing the smell of things beloved but foul (Slim), thankfully, away from my sometimes overly sensitive nose.

Everything was as it should be, the perfect setting for an American drama. What would the world be like if every day were like that?

Slim had his eyes closed, squinting into the sun, absorbing the benefits of his station through his rugged, wrinkly, badly shaven, grime encrusted countenance. I had my mouth half open, suspended in a kind of regal idiocy. My eyes were almost half open, looking, serpent-like at passing girls...and other things. I spied a nice little chirpy bird in one of the trees, for example; greyish with bright yellow wings. What would that be?. I was listening to his song when the ruckus disrupted our reverie.



A 1957 Chevy with loud pipes stopped at the light at the corner of Harrison and Grove. We had a perfect view of the thing from where we sat, those of us who deigned to look. It was less than thirty feet away and we could hardly ignore it for the rumble. Slim sat up and peered evilly, barely able to forgive the disturbance. I didn't like the noise either but, on the other hand, looking at a perfectly constructed, perfectly maintained, man-made thing—this meticulously restored old Chevrolet—was kind of cool. It was very nicely done in original colors, purest snow-white below the trim, a cold rock-hard turquoise above. The convertible top, of course, quite naturally, was down.

The chrome pipes on this pristine piece of American design ingenuity warbled roundly when calm, rumbled threateningly when nudged and roared like a cornered lion when goosed. As it sat there at the light, the driver—a young, good-looking, clean-shaven, nicely attired moron bastard—gunned the engine repeatedly, demonstrating the repertoire for anyone with ears within a hundred yards. He was in control of a mechanical monster, and he wanted everyone to know it. As he sat there gunning the engine and filling the air with a chorus of impressive sounds, I winced. I found that kid sitting behind the wheel of that exquisite vehicle, at that particular intersection, on that extraordinarily fine day, completely irritating.

He was far too young, about my own age, to be so lucky. His smug demeanor was understandable of course; he was, admittedly, the perfect match for that convertible. Together, standing there glistening in the sun, they were the embodiment of the American Dream. Naturally, I despised

the smirk upon his All-American, corn-fed face. I despised his chiseled jaw, lifted just so, his perfectly straight aristocratic nose, his large flat smooth forehead, his flawless sun-tanned skin, that sneering mouth full of pearl-like teeth, the razor cut of his blonde hair, the sinewy muscles of his pumped up forearms. He had it all and it all made me puke. Still, I liked the car.

No one who knew anything could deny the beauty of that beast. Willie, who drove an old '57 rust bucket, and my personal authority on the subject, told me that the 57 Chevy was, in those days anyway, considered by many people to be the finest car ever to roll off an American assembly line. The combination of clean-cut, sporty body styling and the sheer brute power of that engine made grown men whimper. Just seeing it rolling by made some guys salivate. To hear it warble in neutral made them weep. To hear it gurgle as it took off in first, made them weak in the knees.

As said, the 57 Chevy was universally recognized as a mechanical miracle. Anyone born in the United States and brought up on the football field, knew that the 1957 Chevrolet was better than any other car that had been produced before it. Clearly it was better than any that had been produced since. That was the opinion of guys who really knew something about such stuff—guys with permanent residual grease under their nails and service tattoos on their arms, guys blowing smoke out of their grizzled maul with each breath, you know, motor heads.

That engine, that transmission, that drive train and rear axle were all perfectly attuned to one another. Of these

components, the engine was the thing apparently. It produced, by way of unknown and unknowable processes, more horsepower than scientifically or mechanically possible. I'd heard that so many times from so many sources that I believed it myself (and now I'm telling you.)

Something very special indeed was sitting at that red light on that crystal clear day, and it was being driven by pure arrogance. The kid sat through several light changes, while admiring himself in the rearview mirror. He looked pretty good too; he was right for the part, that's the sad thing about it. I wanted to hate the bastard with a tooth-shattering hatred if I could manufacture it, but it kept turning back on itself and producing envy.

Slim was doing a better job at the hatred thing. "I wish he'd just go to Hell with that goddamned piece of noisy junk," he shouted, "steadah sittin' there revving that motor and shattering the quietude!" This was a very long sentence for Slim to have emitted. I was impressed with the degree of his involvement. "The goddamned noise is 'dicolous!" he declared. He was becoming more irritated with each rev of that engine.

By this time two pot bellied middle-aged white guys in t-shirts, and their pudgy little wives, each and every one of them stuffed into stretch jeans, had gathered on the corner. They'd been drawn by the show. With a suitable audience finally in place the young snot gunned the engine and popped the clutch. All smoke and rubber, the great beast lunged forward into the air.

Then, the passenger-side front wheel came off.

The car collapsed onto its side as the wheel rolled away drunkenly, wobbling across Harrison Street. There was a horrible scraping noise as the power plant drove the wounded beast forward through the pavement, plowing up 6 or 8 feet of crumbling asphalt before the engine sputtered to a gasping stop. It sounded very much like an old lawn mower running out of gas.

After its escape, the wheel came quietly to rest against the curb in front of the Laundro-Mat. The car just sat there, exhausted, its front end buried deep enough into the pavement that, as later inspection showed, the ancient cobblestones underneath were revealed. The great machine was crippled; the poor kid was red-faced; the white folks were all dumbstruck, and Slim was elated. The poor kid sat as if carved from stone, riveted behind the wheel, as onlookers appeared from out of nowhere.

There was a lot of pointing and animated gesticulation. Those who had witnessed it, described the event with great authority to others as they arrived to gawk. I guess no one had ever seen anything like that before. I certainly hadn't. My heart went out to the kid as one of these geeks placed a hand on the fender of the felled beast, bent over and, after looking at the half-buried brake drum, came up declaring, "I think I found your problem—you're missin' a wheel!"

Slim laughed out loud and slapped his thighs, "Serves you right." He turned and addressed me, "Serves him right." I said, "That guy's got enough troubles right now."

“Pah! He’s got what he deserves, that’s what he’s got right now.” Slim continued laughing, shaking his head in amusement. He stood up, then awkwardly climbed up on the bench to get a better view. He almost took a tumble, but righted himself by placing one of his goddamned grimy mitts on my head. I was disgusted by his behavior. I shook loose, got up and walked away.

Before entering the Laundro-Mat, I turned and watched as one good American ran across the street and recovered the wayward wheel. The kid, who I’d last seen pinned against the beautifully tucked and rolled turquoise leather seats, was now standing beside his beloved car looking down at the wheel, a changed man. I was a changed man too, no longer resentful, wishing him only well.

## ROUSTED

Late one afternoon, just before the Fall Semester was to begin—there were new students with their parents everywhere you looked—an entire herd of winos was gathered in the park. They weren't drinking; they weren't bothering anybody. Slim and Amos were sitting on one bench, some redneck wino named Harlen, was standing in front of them lecturing. I was sitting on the other bench with an out-patient from the local infirmary. I was thinking about something pretty deeply and hadn't seen the cops drive up. My thoughts were disrupted when a cop spoke with the voice of authority.

"Alright, party's over. All you winos out of the park. Dog-man, Slim, let's go."

The out-patient said, "Oh-oh," and got up and walked quickly right across Harrison Street without looking and without looking back.

"You too," the cop said to Harlen. Harlen stood his ground, folded his arms across his chest and demanded, "Why are you rousting us?"

"Gotta put on a pretty face for the parents," said the cop.

"We don't have the constitutional right to congregate any more in this country?"

The cop looked at the redneck wino while Amos and Slim worked on the beginning process of getting their weary old bones up and on their feet.

"What's your name, troublemaker?"

"My name's None Of Your Business, that's MY fuckin' name," said Harlen. "What's your badge number?"

“You can see my badge number right there,” the cop said touching a finger to his badge. “OK? ...You NOW HAVE 10 seconds to leave this park unassisted.”

Amos and Slim were squeezing their way humbly past the confrontation. The cop stopped long enough to say, “Do yourself a favor, Slim, check in at the V.A. hospital, sober up. Dog-man, let’s go! You too, None-Of-Your-Business.” “I’m not going,” said Harlen. “I want to know why you’re rousting us.”

The cop sighed, “What’s your last name, None-Of-Your-Business?”

“I told you MY fuckin’ name. What about him?” Harlen said and pointed toward me.

“I’m talkin’ to YOU,” said the cop. “What’s your last name?”

“Moseby.”

“You related to Beverly Moseby?”

“He’s a cousin of mine.”

“Well, you’re a crazy as he was.”

“You’re wrong about that, officer,” said Harlen, “I’m crazier. And smarter; and I know my fuckin’ rights.”

“OK, good for you. But, listen, I’m just trying to do my job here. You don’t want to get in the way of someone just doing his job, do you? So, why don’t you...”

“Pure crap,” said Harlen.

“What do you do for a living?” asked the cop patiently.

“I’ll tell you what I DON’T do. I don’t go around threatening people. AND I don’t need a gun and a fuckin’ nightstick to be a man.”

The cop walked a couple steps away from the redneck wino and said something into his walkie-talkie. "Van's on its way," he said to those of us who remained. Harlen just stood there staring at the guy until a police van pulled up to the curb. The cop gestured for him to turn around, and he did so.

"So, now you're gonna arrest me?" Hey! So, now you're gonna arrest me?" He placed his hands, interlocked, behind his head. "This is pure crap."

"Last chance. You go away now, without assistance, or you go home with us in cuffs. It's your decision."

"What for?"

"What for? For being yourself, for being a public nuisance, and a disgrace to humanity."

"What about him?" Harlen was making every effort to involve me in his nightmare.

"What about him?" asked the cop.

"All you see is us winos? You don't see him?"

"All I see is a kid sitting quietly on a park bench."

Harlen glared at me. "I see an over-privileged white, middle-class punk."

When the cop came over to me I felt a chill run up my spine. I shuddered as he leaned toward me.

"You want to leave this area for a little while for your own protection," the cop asked me quietly. I bowed and got up to leave. Harlen was yelling at my back. "Yeah, you better leave, Charlie!"

I looked back and saw Harlen standing there with his hands clasped behind his head and the cop putting handcuffs on him. "This is justice?" he was yelling. "This is justice?!"



THIS is bullshit! This is BULLshit. CHARLIE, you're a witness! THIS IS..."

A day or two after the rousing Slim was really angry with me. When I ran by there on my way to work at 5:30 AM he turned his back on me, in a great dramatic comic gesture. I went over and sat and looked at him until he coughed up.

"You're not down and out like some of the rest of us, so I don't know why you're doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Livin' like a low-life; actin' like a low-life. Hangin' around with us low-lives."

"I was just here. I like this park. I live right there." I pointed.

"Do you want to be a low-life? Is that it?"

"Nope," I said...and I think I may have patted him on the knee. I had to get to work.

## AIRHEAD

Late one afternoon Howard and I were playing chess on the steps of the building where Howard and some dopers and some members of a motorcycle gang lived together in relative peace. Harlen, the redneck wino, was hanging out there as well for some unknown reason, slouching on the steps and drinking our beer. So, there we were, on those steps in the dappled, tree-filtered sunlight. This is where we played chess. This is where Howard beat me, consistently, and I hoped to learn enough to some day beat him.

A reasonably ugly young woman in truly vulgar cut-off jeans came out to discuss something in whispers with Harlen, until they both got up and went quickly into the building, Harlen taking another beer with him. A few minutes later she came out again and whispered something into Howard's ear. He brushed her away like you would a fly. I believe this is the same woman who one evening was in a heated debate with Harlen over which is worse a lying fucker or a fucking liar. (Ultimately, they determined, and I think rightly, that fucking liars are worse.) A few minutes later she came out again and whispered something into Howard's ear. He told her he was busy.

"Come on...Howard!" she whined, "Why not?"

Howard ignored her while concentrating on a move, then squinted up at her and said, "Go away you airhead." She stomped off into the building, and we continued our game.

After a few minutes a big guy in a sleeveless denim jacket came thundering out, wiping his hands on a greasy cloth and bellowing, "HOWARD!" Howard looked up.

"I heard you called my cunt an airhead!" the big guy bellowed.

"She is an airhead," Howard said matter-of-factly, and returned to the game.

While he waited for me to move, the big guy continued to bellow. "I don't like it, Howard. I don't like anybody calling my cunt an airhead."

Howard ignored the guy and prepared to make his next move.

"Howard!" bellowed the big guy, "Are you listening to me, Howard?"

We looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

The guy went back inside, but apparently decided he hadn't said enough or maybe Howard didn't understand what he had said well enough, because he returned and stood behind us fuming. "Howard," he barked, and when Howard turned to face him he pointed at him and said, "it's demeaning, Howard."

Howard looked at him for a bit and then said, "I'm sorry."

"It's demeaning, Howard. It's really demeaning."

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to speak down to your... girlfriend."

"I don't mean her! It's demeaning to ME, Howard."

We looked at each other again, every muscle straining in our effort not to burst into laughter.

"I'm gonna go get a beer," said Howard and got up and walked inside, with the big guy following him. I set the chessboard aside and leaned back to take in the cool afternoon filtered sunlight on the steps.

Harlen reappeared and sat down next to me saying, “Why are you always hanging around here with us low-lifes college boy?”

“Slim asked me that same question the other day,” I said. Thankfully, Howard came out right then and said, “Let’s go in; there’s too much activity around here.” He picked up the chess board like a pizza, and I picked up all the taken pieces in both hands and clutched them to my chest.

So we went into that building and down the hall past a big beautiful old antebellum ballroom. The huge old oak pocket doors to the room were half open so that I could admire the fine carvings on their massive panels. Looking inside I saw the high ceiling, the large stone mantel, wonderful hand-carved oak molding covering every available inch of the place. Lighting it all up like a daydream were floor to ceiling stained glass windows that someone had made a hundred years earlier. The floor was parquetry with a sundial effect. And inside that room, laid out as if it had undergone a carefully controlled explosion, was an old Harley Davidson. All the parts had been placed neatly around the block which sat in the center of the sunburst parquetry in the center of the floor. Parts radiated out in every direction. Here and there were buckets with black liquid in them and newspapers and rags soaking up oil and grease. Gears and chains and who knows what were all sitting there on top of folded newspapers.

As I was standing there, chess pieces cupped in my hands, taking all of this in, a big guy who’d been on his knees doing something in a corner, grunted, rose to his feet, and came over to block my view. “It’s a 1953 knucklehead,” he

said in a challenging manner, "And I don't want you even looking at it."

OK" I agreed and started to walk away.

"I don't want YOU even smelling it!" he shouted after me. When I looked back just to be sure he wasn't coming after me with a tire iron, I saw that he had stepped out into the hallway with a big wrench in one hand. He shouted, "I don't want you even THINKING about my scooter!"

Suddenly, before us, was the airhead. She was smiling sloppily and stumbled against the wall. "Hey, Howard..." she said and crooked a finger at him.

"Let's go out," said Howard and turned around, still carrying the chess set like a pizza. "there's too much activity in here."

So, we turned around and I was very careful not to look at the guy, who had returned to breaking down his bike, or to even glance in that direction as we went by. As requested, I did not smell and I did not even think about that guy's bike.

Outside, we finished the chess game (which Howard won as usual) and finished the beer (a stalemate). We were leaning back under the overhanging trees when Harlen came back out and told me something that I wish, to this very day, he hadn't. Meanwhile Howard had started setting up the board for an evening game under the emerging street light.

## PERCY

After I'd proven myself utterly despicable and completely unworthy of trust, I started doing what Amos called *Spotin'*; making love and breaking hearts wherever I went. In short, I got around. It didn't take long to get the hang of it, and I soon discovered I was, by nature's benevolence, pretty good at it. I mean, *I began to think that* because (believe this if you will, don't if you won't or simply can not) girls I'd slept with were referring other girls to me and sending them in my direction. (For all I know, this sort of thing happens all the time and I'm the last person on earth to know about it.) Nonetheless, I was flattered whenever a girl showed up at my door.

Whether she showed up chattering aimlessly, fingers interlaced just under her chin, rocking forward and back on her heels, with questioning eyes, or appeared in perfect silence, fingers entwined behind her back, twisting herself side to side, with downcast eyes and a goofy smile, or skipped lightly over my threshold in a single gazelle-like leap and stood head tilted to one side, looking shyly up at me from under a wrinkled brow while twirling her hair, entangled fingers told the tale. "Hi..." they all said quietly, "Can I come in?" (...*How cheerfully he seems to grin, how neatly spreads his claws / and welcomes little fishes in / with gently smiling jaws.*)

One night, in the Village Tavern, a kid came up to the booth I was in and sat down across from me. I'd seen him around; I didn't know who he was or where he fit in; we'd never met. I only knew his name: Percy Edmonton III.

I thought he was a drama student. I knew he was a flit. He was very serious when he spoke, serious and secretive.

"You know Amy?" he whispered.

"Amy?"

"You know she always hangs around with us...the theatre crowd."

"Theatre crowd?"

"Tiny little thing with stringy blonde hair, wears yellow chucks."

"Oh. Yeah I know her...with the big eyes?"

"That's her. She's *so* cute, don't you think?"

This whole scene struck me as strangely familiar and I laughed. He looked at me askance, took a dismissing breath (heterosexuals can be so trying at times) and continued.

"Well *anyway*...she told *me* that if I *ever* had the chance to tell you something I should tell you. And, *well*, since I saw you sitting here alone, I thought *this* would be as good a time as any...to tell you."

"*She* wanted *you* to tell *me* something?" I didn't even know the chick. "I don't even know that chick," I said. It seemed like a reasonable thing to say.

"Still, she asked me to tell you; she *begged* me to tell you."

For crying out loud, just tell me and get it over with. That was my impulse. But...during my long lonely nights of giddily slapping paint on canvas, I'd been working on raising one eyebrow, and had developed it to the point where I thought I'd give it a try in public, without the mirror. I'm not sure I even knew what the implication of that gesture was, (still don't) but, I hated to waste the opportunity; this seemed as good a time as any. So, I raised one eyebrow.

In response, Percy just sat there looking at me. Had he not noticed? I was in a quandary. Should I raise the eyebrow again? Should I raise both? Should I shrug? Should I backhand the glass in front of me, sending it skittering across the table and onto the floor, and drunkenly mumble, ‘Get the hell out of here and leave me alone.’ From reading Beckett I knew that every situation holds many options. What could this kid—whom I didn’t know—possibly say to me—from a girl whom I had never met—which was more important than whatever it was I, great thinker that I was, had been thinking about when he came in? Each convolution in this halting conversation left me more distracted. I had more interest in anything else on earth than whatever it was this guy was trying to convey. “OK,” I sighed, “*Please*, tell me,” I pleaded almost mockingly, “What is it she wanted you to tell me?”

He looked around and then leaned across the table toward me and breathed out, “Amy said that she really wants to —————.”

That certainly got my attention. These were the crudest words I’d ever hoped and dreamed might be spoken to me. “She said she’d love to,” he continued.

I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. I shook my head in disbelief. Was I dreaming? No female that I’d ever known had ever uttered such a phrase...even in my sexual fantasies they were more temperate. I leaned across the table toward him. “She told you that she wants to ————— -?” I whispered quietly. “Yes. Those are her exact words.”



“She wants to—————?” I whispered with equal parts shame and hope. (Perhaps I was leaning just a little more toward hope.)

“She wanted me to let you know that.”

I drank my beer very slowly.

I was stunned. Delighted. Stunned. Curious, of course. Stunned. And eager. A bit shocked, naturally. But, stunned. I tried not to show it.

I was having some very real difficulty however. I wanted to be clear about this. I wanted to know that I’d heard him correctly. Or, maybe I just wanted to hear it again.

“*She told you to tell me that she wants to —————*  
*——?*”

“She REALLY wants to —————,” he said and raised both of his eyebrows as if to say, ‘how you gonna top that?’ She said, ‘Tell him I’d ————— any time, anywhere; he doesn’t even have to ask, all he has to do is show up.’ Oh, and she told me to give you this.” He handed me a scrap of paper which, once unfolded with trembling hands, revealed her address. “Any time,” he repeated.

I remained stunned; flattered; nonplused; floored and speechless (not necessarily in that order) for quite a while...and, though seated, felt maybe just a little weak in the knees. My god, what was going on here? I didn’t know what to say or do; for a while I couldn’t say or do anything. I looked down at my hands, at the beer, at the table, around the bar. I was thinking. I mean I was trying to think. ‘She’s a cute kid,’ I reasoned. AND, I was, after all, above all and, maybe especially below all, a living breathing male type

creature. It made a kind of unassailable, natural, good sense. Here was a young girl who wanted to give me a gift, which only a fool would refuse. This had to be some kind of a set-up. Girls didn't go around saying things like that, did they? None of the girls I'd known had. They didn't ask their boy-pal friends to pass such invitations on, did they? No, something was wrong here. Someone wanted to get me to a certain location where they could beat the life out of me without witnesses, or worse, with a crowd of jeering witnesses. I looked at Percy, studied him to see if he was joking or setting me up, or simply messing with my mind. Looking at him, I decided that he was as honest as he was flamboyant, and he was pretty obvious.

So, I thought about it some more. I pondered. I mean there isn't a man on earth that doesn't want some pretty college girl to———. I was a man. And I was on earth, though not firmly attached at that moment. Amy was a very sweet looking, little charmer. Basic arithmetic should have helped me to figure it out. Still, I remained cautious.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Cause we're friends, Amy and I. Cause she asked me to. Cause I want to see her happy." He shrugged. It was all pretty simple.

"You want to see her happy?"

"Yeah, we were sitting around the other day and we were talking about *Happiness* and I said, 'Dear, dear Amy, what would make *you* happy? I mean, what would make you *really* and truly happy?' and she bubbled up immediately and said, 'You know what would make me crazy-happy? ...that painter guy, Edward Fool? I'd like to———'

———. *That* would make me ecstatic.’ Well, of course I was shocked!” He mimed shock for me.

“She said that?”

“Yes, that is what I’m telling you, you numskull!” he said with obvious frustration. He reached across the table to slap the back of my hand. “She said it would make her *deliriously* happy.” He took a dramatic pause before turning peevisish. “Why on earth would I make up such a thing?”

That, indeed, was the question. I must have had a glazed look in my eye because he repeated the tale one more time with appropriate gestures for emphasis.

“Are you hearing me? Do you get the message?”

It was true that I didn’t know what to say or how to respond, but, believe me, I got the message.

“She told me that if I ever ran into you I should tell you that Amy wants to——— and if you want her to———, just drop by her house, any time day or night.”

“Please don’t say it again,” I said and sat in silence for a while. I folded my hands in my lap, then placed them under my thighs, then placed them back on the table and twiddled my thumbs. I think I said, “Yikes.”

“She’ll do it too,” he added.

“Alright.” I said. “Don’t say it again. Please...” He sat back, slumped in the booth and stared at me impatiently. Was he expecting me to send him back to Amy with a response?

*The gentleman is pleased to accept your kind invitation.*

This conversation was from another reality, maybe just a bit beyond the rational limits I'd grown accustomed to. There I was, sitting there thinking about painting and grieving over my break-up with a true angel, frail as a tea cup, and...now this.

"Well you just think about it," said the kid, interrupting my thought. "Well, I've done my job," he said, and tapped the paper with her name on it with one finger. Then he got up and drifted out of the Village.

*Let's all go down to the sea in our little rubber tired boats and discover that place where lovely little creatures with saucer-like eyes plead for the opportunity to push our lust-driven dreams down the steep slope of reasonable expectation and over the cliff of comprehension.*

I had to decide if I was ready for that. I just felt maybe I needed a little more time to prepare for my descent into Depravity.

## **SLIM AND THE ROYCES**

Slim and I were standing on a grass covered hill in the shade of some hickory trees. It was a large park miles away from the little triangle park where we hung out. And, it was morning. So, it was a little unusual in that as well. There was a slight breeze and I could smell ten thousand years of grime and sweat wafting off good old Slim.

“Shhh,” he commanded suddenly. “What do you hear?”

I listened. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Shhh. Listen again.”

I listened. “All I hear is a slight breeze through the trees.”

“Listen HARD,” he urged.

I leaned forward a bit—I guess that means I was listening hard—and I did hear something. I heard the soft crunch of big rubber tires rolling slowly over the hot summer pavement of the lane that curled around through the hillocks of the park.

“I hear tires,” I said.

“Ha!” declared Slim with delight and slapped me on the shoulder. “Here come the Royces!” I looked at him and he looked like a kid...a badly shaven, smelly old kid layered in overcoats.

We’d gotten there, on the back of a newspaper truck. The driver knew Slim somehow and gave us both a hand up into the back where we sat with our backs propped against tall unsteady stacks of old newspapers. When we got out at the park, something maybe not quite right occurred. Instead of us paying the driver for his services, the driver paid us; he gave Slim a dollar bill, then said, “I’ll swing by to pick you up, after I dump this load...’bout an hour or so.”

We were there because the night before Slim had said, “You want to see something wonderful like you ain’t never seen before?” and I’d answered yes. We’d come by newspaper truck because he’d said, “I’ll provide the transportation; you don’t want me stinking up your fine car, Charlie.” And, I’d agreed.

So there we were, standing on that hill, under what Slim said were hickory trees. We’d been watching a bend in the road below as perfectly restored old automobiles, Packards and Hudsons, LaSalles and Desotos, Model Ts and Stanley Steamers, chugged and clattered and belched and fffft-fff-fited their way by. They were on their way to a spot down the road where they would be carefully parked, tenderly washed, lovingly dried, gently polished, doted upon from a respectful distance, and, ultimately judged for perfection. It was true that we knew in advance when a fresh herd of these old vehicles were on their way by their engine sounds, their hissing and clattering and gurgling. But, not so with the Royces.

As they came into view Slim asked, “You hear any engine sound?”

I leaned forward. “Nope.”

“You hear any muffler?”

I cupped an ear. “Nope.”

Slim was grinning. “Ex-ackerly. Can’t even hear that engine turn over. They got a light on the dash to tell the driver when the engine has started. I love them Royces.”

As he was saying this a long line of Rolls Royces drifted into sight and began to float silently by. Slim’s eyes were

sparkling with childlike delight. While we walked down the slope Slim told me a little history of the Rolls Royce and why he, and everyone who knew anything about the matter, preferred to call them Royces. Apparently Royce was the engineer behind these magnificent machines—the guy who set the incredibly tight, almost unattainable tolerances on every aspect of the design, manufacture and assembly of these grand vehicles. Royce was the guy who demanded a hand-hammered body and ensured that each part was flawless when checked by blindfolded perfectionists; he was the guy who insisted that thirty two thousand hand-rubbed coats of clear varnish be applied on top of 640 coats of unique, custom designed, hand-mixed color; the guy who oversaw the selection and handling of perfectly matched leathers for the interior—which would then be hand-stitched by pre-pubescent female descendants of Queen Clothilde, virgins who had eaten only carrots since age seven. Rolls was only the money man.

When we entered the grove where all the cars were being placed side by side, Slim smiled and slapped me on the shoulder. “Heaven,” he said. I agreed. What Slim didn’t know is that I’d been a fan of Rolls Royce for years. I’d read a book or two; but more importantly, while in high school, I made a pilgrimage each year to a town some thirty miles away to look at, admire, and actually *sit in* the new models. So, yeah, I had to agree with Slim. I loved the look of all these old cars and I liked the idea that people had gone to the effort to restore them and maintain them. It was Heaven. Slim and I both began to run (each in our own way) toward the Royces, and he actually beat me to them. There were maybe eight, maybe a dozen Rolls Royces of

different years and models, half with red logos. Slim came to a stop in front of the first of these.

“Mr. Royce himself built this car!” he declared wide-eyed. “Look at that, Charlie. Royce built that car; adjusted the goddamned bolt heads on the valve cover himself.” Slim was like a little kid—a dirty, smelly, grease-encrusted little kid, with missing teeth and pink eye.

“Can we see the engine, Mister?” Slim asked the owner eagerly.

“Step back,” snapped the guy, “And don’t touch anything.”

“Hey,…” I started to say, but Slim put one hand on each of my shoulders and turned me aside. He put his finger to his lips. “Shhhh. It’s OK.” he said.

The gentleman folded back the top of the engine compartment gingerly and Slim, placing his hands respectfully behind his back, leaned in to have a look. He just stood there looking at the engine for a very long time, with the owner hovering anxiously beside him, and me eyeing the owner. I was seething. Finally Slim straightened up, grinning and said, “You ever see anything quite like that before, Charlie?” He took one final look and began to lead me away with firmness. I swung around to see the owner of the vehicle already buffing out the spot where Slim’s breath might have tarnished the surface of his possession. I broke away from Slim and went back. I went right up to the guy. He was about my height, about my father’s age, slightly balding, dressed like a golfer, with a Rolls Royce emblem embroidered on his pale yellow knit shirt. I looked him in the eye. “You’re an asshole,” I said.



He smiled smugly, as only the very rich can, and snorted, "And that's what you think." The rich are never appalled by their own behavior, no matter how shameful. "Yes. That's what I think." I said. He smirked at that and, shaking his head, turned his back on me. By this time Slim was leading me away by the elbow again and the crowd—good people who simply wanted to look at some fine cars without riff-raff disrupting their pleasant afternoon—parted before us like the Red Sea. We must have made quite a frightening pair, the clearly insane old wino and the enraged hippie.

We walked back down the road, up over the hill where we'd watched the cars arrive and to the edge of the park to await our ride home in the back of a newspaper truck. We sat on the edge of the curb waiting, me sullen and seething, Slim poking at the pavement with a twig he'd picked up.

"So, what did you think?" he asked.

"I told that guy *exactly* what I thought," I snapped.

"What did you think of that engine?"

"Built by a genius, restored by an asshole," I smoldered.

"Charlie," said Slim, "If I didn't know you better, I'd a thought I didn't know you at all."

It was a sentiment many women would later share.

Under the surface I was still fuming, but I laughed. That was precisely how I felt about what had transpired.

"I've never used that word before in my life," I confessed.

"An' here you've gone and used it twice in one day."

"Honestly. I've never said that word before in my life."

"Still," he shrugged, "you delivered it like a licensed professional."

## BEV

Bev was an interesting creature. She dressed like a hobo—which was something I knew something about—so if she was lovely and lithe, few observers could have detected it under the layered rags and patches. Our generation quickly developed an eye for such hidden beauty however—in those days the woods...I mean the streets, were full of lovely little saucer-eyed creatures dressed like gypsies and vagabonds—but upon close inspection their plain, unassuming, sparkling beauty emerged. Bev looked like that model Waterhouse used in all of his paintings, and though I'd been indifferent to her charms, by some ploy unknown and unknowable she attracted plenty of others.

I'd dismissed her as being of no interest, meaning I suppose that I had no desire to sleep with her, because I was busy with other things, girls I did want to sleep with. But, one day she drew me toward her by saying something intriguing in painting class or something insightful in aesthetics, and I chased her down after class to ask her about it. We, and by that I suppose I mean I, got so involved in our conversation, and by that I mean her responses to the endless string of questions that came spilling out of me, that we found ourselves standing at the foot of the steps leading up to her flat.

It was in a part of town where no other students lived—perhaps no other human being lived. The entire block was abandoned buildings slated for demolition, as much of that part of Richmond was at that time. Standing there at her door step, I did not know that I was about to enter another world. During our walk together, without yet being aware

of it, I had become ensnared by Bev's charms; charms which I could not then, and can not now, explain. Until I heard her speak I had been immune. Standing in front of those rickety steps, the hobo attire began to look kinda good on Bev though. She had great hazel eyes.

Arriving at the top of the stairs we were enthusiastically greeted by a skinny, geeky looking kid who bowed and scraped and simpered and practically kissed Bev's feet—ignoring me all the while. He offered her some tea and ran out of the room quickly to get it, announcing in joyous tones along the way that Bev had returned. Almost immediately devotees came pouring into the room. I was surprised to see among them, Warren—a kid I'd seen with Jane a couple of times before. I tried not to act surprised—though I'd always assumed that he had married someone and gone off to Wisconsin or Minnesota to produce offspring, or had drifted off into some distant plane of reality sweetly interlocked throughout eternity with Jane. But there he was—Warren—and clearly he was devoted to Bev. I was shoved aside to become a mere observer as three young men my age, and one or two younger women, stood around beaming and blinking at Bev.

Bev and I took seats at a large round oak table and were both given tea. After we were served, the empty chairs around the table filled up quickly and the devotees all started jockeying to get her attention. An animated, breathy discussion of di-di-do-decta-hedrons broke out and a large gilt-framed photograph of Buckminster Fuller appeared in the middle of the table. Candles were lit. I winced. I was pretty sure chanting was next...or maybe camp songs.

When she decided that the kids could handle the discussion by themselves Bev got up, extended a gracious hand toward me and, in fairly direct terms, invited me to go with her into her bedroom. It was all a little too weird for me, experienced as I was, and I declined.

“You know, uh...I think I’m just gonna leave,” I said. I’ve never been a sheep-like kinda guy, and I was thinking that Bev was perhaps just a bit more than I could handle.

I think everybody there was startled by my response, especially Bev. Her eyebrows rose so high upon her majestic face that they almost receded into her hairline.

Apparently no one, man nor god, had ever rejected the opportunity to serve Bev. But she recovered quickly.

“That’s OK,” she said simply, and for the first time I could really see the attraction. In that light, at that moment, she was not only beautiful but truly desirable. I regretted my decision immediately, but felt that a reversal at that point would be a mistake for anyone with any self-esteem, and I still had a drop or two left, though God knows I had no right to it.

“You know, uh...well, you know...I think I’ll, uh...just...uh, you know, leave.”

Upon that remark all the males in the party became super-animated; jumping to their feet, they began to bob up and down as if afloat in the rapidly expanding pool of their own gushing eagerness. She chose Warren from among the buoyant, flailing attendants, took the lucky fellow by the hand and lead him into her room. The others sat down again, disappointed no doubt, but anxious to get back to work on free-standing, self-sustaining, domed, crystalline

residential structures. I was half-heartedly invited to stay and pretend with them not to hear the royal rutting—which began pretty quickly—in the next room, but declined. “Are you sure you won’t stay?” asked a lovely little girl with big blue blinking eyes and a fairly solid understanding of her own powers.

But, with Bev gone I felt free to say exactly what I thought. “I’m not really a cult kinda guy,” I said apologetically as I stood up.

“That’s OK,” they all chimed in together robotically and, for a fleeting second, the youngest girl was looking pretty good. “Come back again sometime,” she said sweetly, placing an idle finger on my belt buckle. Looking into her eyes St. Dunstan made sudden good sense to me.

When iron smith, Dunstan saw the Devil approaching one day in the form of a pretty young maiden, he grabbed that Devil by the nose with red hot pincers, and threw her into the river to drown. With that lesson in mind—but no pincers handy—I left that place...and quickly.

In fairness I must now take the stand to answer certain unavoidable questions.

Did I ever go back to that house again in the hope of running into Bev and being invited back in?

Yes. Ok? Yes I did. One time. But only once.

Did I ever look longingly across the park, at that house and think about what went on in there?

Puh! What kind of a question is that? Who wouldn’t?

Did I ever think about what Bev had going there and kinda, you know sorta, in the very vaguest way, wish that I had allowed her to take ME by the hand into her room that day?

Of course. And of course not. Maybe just a bit more *of course* than *of course not*.

Did I ever look further into Bucky Fuller's work, writings, philosophy and what-all-ever-else?

Not even briefly. I'm not really a follower. I'm guessing I'd feel ridiculous in any cap with matching windbreaker, and more ridiculous still surrounded with others in similar attire. Besides, I like my heroes thoroughly drunk and driving a hook and ladder truck down main street in the middle of the night.

Did I ever wonder, since Bev was the queen there, if I could have been king there, and what benefits that might have entailed?

Not for a single heart beat. Whatever she had going, I wanted no part of it. You know, in those days I really did, in all honesty, when it got right down to it, only wish to be left alone, undisturbed, with some paint, some canvas, and all the time in the world.

But I did wonder about that Warren guy. Clearly he had something ticking inside of him that resonated in the loins of desirable young women.

## **GOODBYE, SLIM**

One afternoon I was sitting in the park pawing through a stack of books which my parents had bought for me. It was the Vision and Value series; it was hard to come by and very expensive; a compilation of the thinking of various authorities in the field of visual perception and one of the few possessions I ever physically ached to possess. When a shadow fell across the page I looked up and there was Slim, standing there with a suitcase in his hand. I smiled, squinted, and shielded my eyes with a salute.

"I guess I'll be headin' down to Florida. I got a sister there," he said.

"You look good, Slim," I found myself saying.

"Welp, they treat you good in the veteran's hospital."

"I'd forgotten that you were a veteran..." I said like an idiot. If there was anything evident about Slim it was his service to this country.

"We all were. Whole generation. Big flock, brainless sheep. Save the world. 'Course it had to be done. None of us were what you would call deep thinkers though. We did what we were told; we did what we had to do. Otherwise, they called you a Nazi."

"I get called a communist a lot."

"It goes on. How did you think I knew so much about that hollow guy? Maybe we were forgotten on the same island. That coulda been MY statue. That coulda been MY rump of iron. 'Stead, I got this raspberry for a nose. That's my medal."

"I don't think it looks so bad. Are you gonna sit down?"

"I wear it with shame. But..." He turned up his suitcase on end and sat on it. "I sure as hell earned it," he said.

“You don’t want to end up like this, son,” he said.

“Course, you don’t want to end up like that either—like that hollow guy. It’s a tightrope all the way.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

“I’m afraid you prolly do.”

“I do,” I said trying to sound convincing.

“Well good then. I’ll tell you something else too.”

“What’s that, Slim?”

“There is no truth in the bottom of that bottle. Don’t waste your time looking for it there. I already tried it. It’s a goose chase for sure.”

“I don’t drink, Slim,”

I lied. At that point I was drinking regularly, steadily, sometimes heavily, mostly beer.

“Good. Don’t start. I told that redneck wino to stay away from you. He didn’t like it, but, who knows what he’ll do. It’s up to you.”

“I know.”

“I believe you do,” he said wearily while looking me in the eye. “‘Bout your art: ignore what people say. Paint your pictures. You know what’s good and what’s not. They’ll try to tell you that what you’re up to is silly. They’re all jealous. Jus’ ignore ‘em.”

He stood up and fiddled with the edge of his suitcase.

“Look up at that old moon up there when you can. It’s as solid as a rock. Latch on to something big like that. I seen you waltzing by here with a girl the other day. Find one you like, grab a hold on t’ her, don’t ever cross her. It doesn’t matter what she looks like, no matter what they say,



that don't matter. There's more value in a good wife than anything else on this globe. You like my new haircut?"

"Looks good."

"Compliments of the United States government. All it cost was my innocence. The nose came with the deal. No extras charge. Goes well with the suit don't you think?"

"You look like you just stepped out of the pages of Gentleman's Quarterly."

"All I need is a boutonniere and a casket to lie down in."

"No. You look good, Slim."

He did. And healthy too; I hardly recognized the man.

"Your tax dollar at work. Only way my sister will recognize me is the nose. I hear you'll be heading up to Pennsylvania."

"Christmas vacation. Visit the folks. You know."

"Looks like we're heading in different directions then. I sure hope so. I like you a whole lot, kid." I stood up and Slim pulled me in and gave me a hug. (And, unless you were there, it's impossible to convey how rare such a thing was in those days.) "I gotta be down to the Greyhound. Don't want them to hold the bus just for me."

I started to speak but he gestured that it was not required.

"You sit back down. Enjoy the sun." He picked up his suitcase. "Look at this bag will you? Not a thing in it. Part of the act though." Slim began to walk out of my life.

"Thanks, Slim!" I shouted.

"That's what we're here for!" he shouted back.

Amos told me one time that Slim had been abandoned on an island in the Pacific, and that he'd been captured and held in a big pit with two other guys, under a sheet of corrugated tin. One of those guys died in that pit. I think Slim died a little too, but not until he got home and realized that nobody really gave a goddamn about what he'd been through.

## GOODBYE, AMY

To say that I'd taken full advantage of the offer that Amy had made would be less than an understatement. And, I realize that 'shameful' is not really an adequate word to describe my behavior. I'm a disgrace, I admit it. I offer no excuse and I don't think you'd buy it anyway. So, on with the gruesome tale. Back then... at the beginning, she lived less than two blocks from me. So of course it would be silly for me to walk by her place and not drop in once in a while, if only to say hello. It was a matter of courtesy. And when she moved out of the neighborhood to an apartment 20 blocks away, it was sort of a pain to get there, but courtesy has its demands.

Here's weirdness: Amy didn't want a *relationship*, she didn't want a lover, she didn't want my friendship or the advice of an emerging painter. It was pretty much as Percy had laid it out for me that day in the Village; she just wanted to...And, just as he'd predicted, it seemed to make her deliriously happy. I was very nervous about all of this, naturally, at first. Hesitant. Skittish. So, I'd checked around with various people in the community before ever ringing that doorbell, and discovered obliquely that this was not a service Amy had offered to others—it really was reserved just for me. Imagine what that news might do to the ego of a thoroughly despicable, unencumbered, young scamp.

When it comes to the story of Job, the Bible has it all wrong. Instead of challenging Him to take away all of Job's fine possessions, the Devil should have challenged God to GIVE Job whatever he wanted. You want to drive a wedge in between *any* male and *any* overwhelming benevolent

being, give him wealth, give him success, see what happens. Or, take the direct route, give him a girl like Amy. Take away all his earthly possessions and God may be the only thing the poor man has left, but give him a girl like Amy and, *Excuse me, God, would you mind, you know, taking a little walk?*

That aside, every time I knocked on Amy's door I sang a thousand silent songs of thanks. I was truly, truly, a very, very thankful young man at that moment. My heart, my body, my mind, my soul resonated with the purest ringing thanksgiving every time I crossed that blessed threshold. And, I was devoted. Devoted. A convert.

There were times when I walked those 20 blocks, and times when I took the slowest bus on earth. There were times when I hitchhiked, times when I ran. I covered that distance sober, drunk, stoned, delighted, regretful, shameful, eager. But, above all, I wanted to make sure that Amy was happy. Sun, rain, snow, dark of night, nuclear war, nothing prevented me from honoring my commitment to this pretty young girl's happiness. I would have crawled if necessary. Through broken glass, if it came to that. During those torturous, unnecessarily lengthy blocks I had plenty of time to think. And during that time I wondered about Amy; what she thought she was doing, why she was doing it, and I wondered, of course, about my own sanity, my own culpability, my soul, my damnation, my pleasure, my happiness, my greed, insatiability...and whether or not any of it mattered. (I usually decided that it didn't.)

With any hope of ever becoming a decent human being again lost utterly, reason told me that I might as well enjoy my sub-human existence. Whatever the depth of my thoughts, the anguish of my concerns, I always arrived at her door without so much as a single thought in my head. Well, one, but, I didn't even need that...Amy would take care of that for me. (But, oh, it gets worse.)

The last time I saw Amy, I arrived at her place in the middle of a bright sunlit Sunday afternoon and a clean, casually dressed gentleman, about my father's age, answered the door. I asked if Amy was there, and he invited me in.

On the couch sat a perfectly proper woman and her prim young daughter, both flowery in Spring-like dresses. In a chair sat an unnecessarily clean-cut teenaged boy (he could have been me three years earlier). That sure was one nice all-American middle class family. The gentleman took a seat on the couch next to his younger daughter and patted her on the knobby knee. Amy appeared in the hallway, introduced me to her parents and then, taking me by the hand, lead me quickly down the short hall, into the next room... and...pushing me up against the door with real urgency, proceeded to do what Amy did. My crime—and who could see it as anything less—was that I only struggled briefly.

I'm sorry to say that with time this tale has not evolved into one of my more charming, more endearing moments.

After 20 minutes or so, we emerged; her father stood up, we shook hands and smiled and looked each other directly in the eye, him questioningly, me unblinkingly innocent, and we both agreed it had been a pleasure to meet one another. Her mother smiled wanly and looked down at her prayerful hands as if knowing more than any mother might want to know (women have such instincts), and I began to wobble drunkenly toward the door.

At the door, Amy caught up to me, took my hand and explained quickly that she was moving back home and, since this was the last time she'd ever see me, she wanted to tell me something. I was surprised; I had no idea what she was about to say. This was the first time I could recall her ever holding my hand. She held it in both of hers and swung it about like a young girl with a crush. As she stood there in front of me, a tiny little saucer-eyed beauty, she smiled sweetly, and took in a big breath before speaking.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank *you*," I said and stopped short of saying, "the pleasure was all mine." I hoped with all my heart that wasn't perfectly true.

Amy stood up on her tip-toes and kissed me very softly on the cheek. It was the first time I can ever remember her kissing me.

"Gosh," I said. And meant every word of it.

## **GOODBYE, PERCY**

After Amy had departed I was approached a second time by the go-between, Percy Edmonton III. I hadn't seen him for maybe a year, but suddenly, one day, there he was.

"May I sit down?" he asked. After settling in and ordering a cup of tea over his shoulder, as if he might be French royalty and this café the royal court, he said, "It's such a shame that Amy left." I agreed. "I bet you miss her dearly." I admitted it.

"She's a nice kid," I said. I was thinking, Now what?

"Yes," he said, "and we wish her well in all that she may do. But that leaves you...you know...kind of..." he leaned across the table toward me and said, "without someone to \_\_\_\_\_."

I winced. "You know, I don't want to sit here and talk about that."

"Well, OK," he said quickly, "but I know someone else who might. I mean if you don't want to find yourself suddenly high and dry."

I gulped my coffee and studied this guy carefully. "Who?" I asked just out of curiosity. And, admittedly, at that very moment I realized that I had purposefully, consciously, stepped over the line. Whatever innocence and just good plain fun might have been assigned to my affair with Amy could not be extended to cover what I was tempted to do now. The churning in my gut told me so.

"Well, what do you think of Terri?" he asked tilting his head and batting his eyes.

"Terri...? I don't even know Terri."

"Well, that's funny because she knows you. She's in your drawing class."

I thought about it. There was a girl in my drawing class named Terri. "In my drawing class? Wears a beret once in a while?"

"Well..." he said, smacking his lips, "She said she simply *hates* to see you all sad over Amy's leaving, and all lonely-like. She'd like to step in and help you out."

"She told you this?"

"Isn't it wonderful how well connected I am with girls who are interested in your happiness?"

"I don't believe it."

"Well, OK," he said, "it's your loss." And he started to get up.

"Wait. Wait," I said, extending a hand. "What exactly did Terri say?"

"Oh, she told me that she wished you weren't so sad and that she knew how to make you forget all about Amy, and that she would \_\_\_\_\_."

I think that was what I wanted to hear.

"Those are her exact words?"

It goes on...it goes on. Eventually a time was set and I was to meet Terri at Percy's place.

When I got there, Percy, dressed in a Japanese robe of some sort, opened the door, invited me in, and directed me into a little bedroom fitted out like a harem. He told me that Terri would be in, in a few moments. In the meanwhile he made suggestions which were foreign to my nature, and more than a little frightening. He said, "I could get things rolling and when Terri comes in she can take over." He batted his heavily made-up eyes at me and shrugged



coquettishly. I was immediately and completely freaked out by this.

"Terri doesn't mind," he said, but that failed somehow to comfort me.

"I do," I said. "I mind."

"Well, how about if Terri gets you started and then I take over just for a little bit and then Terri finishes what she started?"

This triggered something in me which had me asking frantically, 'Where's Terri? and alternately, 'When's Terri going to get here?' I asked each of those questions a dozen times with increasing concern before Percy was driven from the room. After a very long time, Terri came in dressed in practically nothing, smiling and said, "Hi. I'm glad you decided to accept our invitation." I didn't like the word "our" in that statement. Percy sat down beside me, patted the back of my hand and said, "He's a bit skittish." Terri pouted, "Are you? Are you skittish?"

She lied down beside me and said, "Don't you think it would be fun for the three of us...?"

That had the same effect on me as the shot from a starting gun has on an Olympic sprinter.

"Oh no. NO no no NO. No, we can not..."

She said, "It's just the same. If anything, Percy is even better than I am."

Percy said, "Oh, Terri I am not...well, maybe a wee bit."

They finished that debate without me, because I was on my way out the door. "You must be out of your minds!" I was saying to myself as I RAN from that house. "You must be

out of your goddamned minds.” My guess is, they thought I was. I could hardly argue...I was certainly very close.

As I stumbled out into the bright afternoon light, I immediately came upon an old black man sitting in the cab of an ancient flatbed delivery truck, with the door open. His feet were resting on the running board and his head was in his hands. When he looked up, he looked every bit as frightened as I was. He was shaking, maybe he was in tears.

It was an old Dodge—1930’s, with the headlights still attached to the side of the radiator grillwork. The cowlings were folded back and the engine was right there in plain sight. I was amazed at how much space there was in that engine compartment; you could have crawled in there with it. There was just the block and a few small wires, nothing more. You could look down and see the paving stones on N. Harvie Street below.

“What happened?” I asked stepping into the street. He looked up and investigated me as though I might have descended from the sky.

“What happened?” I repeated. “Did it conk out on you?”

“Suh?”

“Did it just quit on you...can’t you get it started?”

“Suh?”

“Maybe I can help you get it going again.”

He looked at me all eyes, as if to say, “You DO know that this is Richmond, Virginia, don’t you? You DO know that Richmond is still the Capital of the Confederacy? You DO know that I’m black, and that you are white...don’t you?”

“Suh,” he said quietly, “I don’t know what I’m gonna do, she just cain’t turn over.”

I don’t recall the circumstances but one time—not too much earlier—my father gave me a little lecture on what to look for IF a car wouldn’t start. It required air, a spark, and gas—but not too much gas. I leaned in and removed the big-as-a-barn air cleaner. “Do you have a spark?” I asked the man who now stood behind me. He was watching cautiously as a stranger worked under the hood of his truck. “OK, climb in and try to turn it over when I tell you.”

I disconnected one of the sparkplug wires and propped it up near the block and backed off. I’ve never known enough about electricity to be comfortable around it, and I have always been pretty sure that if I did, it would soon give me all the reason I needed to reclaim my caution. When he bumped it a spark flew between the end of the wire and the block, so I replaced that. Then—I don’t know what it had to do with, but I remembered my father inserting a pencil into the throat of the carburetor one time and opening the butterfly valve in there. So, I pulled a paint brush out of my back pocket and inserted it into the carburetor, and went around to the gentleman.

“What I would like you to do is to push the accelerator all the way to the floor and hold it. DO NOT let it up. DO NOT pump it. Just hold it to the floor.”

“Suh? You mean the gas pedal when you say ‘celerator?”

“Yes. Hold it down and DO NOT let it up. DO NOT pump the gas. Just turn it over; let’s see what happens.”

“Don’t pump it?”

“Don’t pump it; keep it floored.”

“‘Bout the choke?”

“Leave the choke in.”

“She needs choke to turn over.”

“Leave the choke in, please. Let’s just try that first.”

I went back to the engine and pushed the butterfly as far open as it would go and shouted, “OK, give it a try!” When the thing tried to turn over a little puff of smoke came out of the carburetor. “Stop. STOP.” I shouted. I removed the paint brush. From my brief experience I thought we were on the right track; this old truck was about to start. I *knew* it. I felt like a million dollars. “OK.” I shouted, “OK, let’s try it one more time, just keep turning it over and don’t quit. When it starts take your foot off the gas immediately.”

The old man looked at me completely bewildered. How could a young hippie know so much about this old truck? I opened the butterfly valve again and when he cranked the starter—when it sounded like it was ready and the smell of gas had dissipated— I withdrew the brush and sure enough that engine kicked over. The driver took his foot off the gas immediately and the thing was sitting there just ticking away like an old sewing machine. “Ha-ha!” I laughed, as I replaced the giant air filter.

He was right by my side. After looking around a bit at his engine, he folded the cowlings down gently and latched it to the fender. “Cool, huh?” I asked. The delight in the old man’s eyes agreed, it was not only cool, for him it was some kind of miracle. All I was doing, of course, was imitating something I’d seen my father do.

“There you go,” I said, “You’re on your way.”

“Suh, thank you, Suh,” he said humbly. He climbed back in behind the wheel, slammed the door shut, put it in gear and whirled off around the corner and down Park Avenue.

When I had my head under there I’d noticed a dull mustard colored cylinder of some sort with a jet black wire leading out of one end of it. I was thinking about that as I started to walk away. I liked the way that sooty black line sat against that mustard color. Maybe I could do something with that.

As the old man putted around the corner, he was still looking at me as though I was something he had never seen before or, perhaps, something he never expected to see again.

I feel like I kinda broke even that afternoon.

## **HOW I ACQUIRED MY DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES**

I don't know why the candidates for President—typically products of Washington politics themselves and knowledgeable about the way things are really done there—don't seem to ever see what's coming. Why do they not see what lies ahead? In their eagerness to seize authority they never look back to observe the carnage-bestrewn past either. If they did, they might see what a mess they're getting into. I have to think (honestly now) that the mere fact that a man chooses to run for that office reveals a fatal flaw in his ability to think things through.

I know what they feel like during their run for office however. I know it first-hand, and I'll tell you how I know it. This is a tale that I have not told anyone before because it's idiotic and extraordinarily embarrassing, unlike so much of the rest of these noble tales.

One night, long after midnight—for that's when we did these things—I was walking along some street with my friend, Rick. I noticed that we were going by an apartment building that I was familiar with. (There must have been girls in there.) It was built in a typical Southern shotgun style arrangement, with a long hallway running from the front door all the way to the back. The doors to several apartments came off either side of that long hall. Lest you think I'm crazier than I am, I have to confess that I was drunk at the time, apparently very drunk, and maybe 20 years old. I don't know which had the greatest influence over what I was about to do.

Crooking my finger I encouraged Rick to the front door, and as I opened it, I said, "Watch this!" Then—for reasons which I will never be able to explain to anyone, including myself, and especially my poor dear wife—I started running as fast as I could down that hallway...with no intention of stopping. I was still accelerating when, mid-stride, I hit the wall at the far end.

Of course the impact knocked me down. It was like running head-on into an oncoming semi truck. It was like sitting in front row seats at an Ornette Coleman concert. Worse, it was like taking a belly-flop into an empty pool.

As I was laying there on my back, laughing hysterically (I guess that tells you something), the doors to the various apartments on either side of the hall were opening up and human beings were cautiously sticking their heads out to see what the heck that big BOOOM could have been. Naturally, I found this absolutely hilarious. Rick was approaching me and saying, "Edward, are you alright?" I lay there for while before he helped me to my feet. "Why did you do that?" he asked. "Pretty impressive, huh?" I replied.

I thought I'd put on a pretty good show.

So, anyway, through that experience I gained first-hand insight into what it must be like for the poor power drunken fool who, after campaigning arduously for the Presidency, looks around one day and discovers that he's won.

## **RENTING A GARAGE WITHOUT COOKIES**

At some point in 1969 I had the very good luck to discover what idiots rich people can be. For the first few bars of a song I picked up a 1957 Mercedes 219 four door sedan from the people who had driven it off the showroom floor. It still looked pretty much like a new car when I bought it. The following year, I traded that Mercedes for a 1957 Mercedes 190SL (a little sports convertible). I'd decided that I was too young to be driving around in a sedan, and the guy who had the 190SL had decided (my very good luck) that he was just too old to be driving around in it. It was a flat trade as I recall. It would have had to be.

And though the 219 sedan sat on the street for as long as I'd owned it—and sparkled like a polished jewel—the sports car needed housing. Somehow—I don't recall how—I ended up renting a garage space from an old guy on Park Avenue whose name was Collier, and before, during and after striking the rental deal, he went out of his way to show me many publishing artifacts which proved he was one of THE Colliers. I knew from his presentation that I was supposed to be impressed and, since I needed the garage, I did everything to convince him that I was.

He lived alone in a lovely, extremely tidy, little house, with old magazines in stacks everywhere and whenever I came to pay my rent, he did everything he could, while employing the most cautious subtlety, to convince me that if I was the kind of young man that might like to hang around with older men, then he was the type of older man that would love to hang around with a younger man like



me. I didn't commit one way or the other because I needed the garage, and the rent was exceptionally low.

It was a pretty good situation, as said, and Mr. Collier always treated me with an exaggerated courtesy and great, almost painful, kindness—tea and cookies were sometimes involved.

One day I made the mistake of showing up to get my car with my girlfriend in tow when Mr. Collier was out puttering in his garden. I can still see him standing there in the alley, glaring at me with his hands on his hips, as we drove off.

The next time I came to pay my rent, the kindly, doting, Mr. Collier had changed. He seemed sullen and maybe even a bit angry as he told me that he once again had use of his garage and that I *had better find another place* to house my vehicle. Of course when I did so, I discovered that other folks, folks who were not the last remaining remnant of the Collier fortune, charged about three times what good old Mr. Collier had been charging me. And they never offered me tea and cookies. Not once.



## **The RAMBLER**

One day Rick asked me if I knew anything about cars. He told me that he wanted to buy a car to drive out to California and that he had a particular car in mind. He wanted someone to check it out for him before he bought it. I told him that I had witnessed my father going through the process of checking out cars first for my brother and then myself and finally, my sister, and I felt like I knew what to do, and why. So, it was agreed that I would go with Rick to check out this car.

“It’s a Rambler,” he warned.

“That’s OK. It’s not unusual to see a Rambler still out there on the highway.”

“And it’s pretty old.” The thing was—I forget—maybe twenty years old and had something like 90,000 miles on it.

“That’s probably a good sign,” I told Rick. Over twenty years, 90,000 miles isn’t a lot of mileage and it might be an indication that that particular car was still in pretty good shape. It had, reportedly, had only one owner and that was also a good sign, from what I’d been taught. So, we went out to look at the Rambler.

Here is what I did: I walked around it. I knelt down and sighted along the edge of each side length-wise, to see if there had been any broadside damage repair. I stood up on the front bumper in the middle and observed it as the shocks returned it to its normal height. I stood up on the bumper in one corner in the front and rocked it to see if it rolled or swayed on the bushings. I went around back and leaned on, first one fender, and then the other to see how the springs responded. I leaned into the driver’s side window and cranked the wheels out, and watched as they

moved. I wanted to see that they moved smoothly, and they did. I squatted down and looked carefully at the tread of each of the four tires, looking for wear that might indicate problems with the various parts of the wheel and steering assembly. I took each wheel in my hands and tried to wobble it, checking for wear on the wheel bearings and wheel assembly. I placed the car on a jack and removed one wheel and looked at the brake assembly. I looked at the inside of the wheel, for scrape marks, for rust, for oil. I looked at the brake lines and fittings for leaks. I asked Rick to get in and pump the brakes while I watched. I opened up the hood and looked in there. I pinched every hose. I didn't want any that were either brittle or mushy. I looked at all the wires. I didn't want any that looked like they'd ever been burnt. I didn't want any that were cracked or exposed. I removed the air filter and looked down and around the throat of the carburetor for blackening. I pulled two random spark plugs and looked at their tips. I didn't want any oil, excessive soot or rust. I especially didn't want to discover that they were brand new. I looked at the radiator and the water in the radiator. I crawled under the car and looked at the ground beneath the engine, looking for oil leaks. I looked at the underside of the engine, the transmission and the rear bell housing, to see that they hadn't been recently cleaned up. I observed the inside of the rocker panels and the wheel wells, looking for rust. I asked the owner to open the trunk and I pulled up the mat to look at the state of things underneath. I checked the spare to see that it was in good shape and held air. I stuck my finger in the exhaust pipe and ran it around and looked at what came out. It was black but not rich. It was dry. I pulled up the floor mats in the front of the car and looked at the floor board.

Then I asked Rick to get in and start ‘er up. I asked him to step on the brakes and to turn on the turn signals and try the headlights and horn. I looked at the engine. I listened carefully to the engine. I looked at the block below the head gasket for excessive oil and spatter. I removed the air cleaner again and asked Rick to gun it a couple times as I watched for smoke or fire or anything unexpected. I went around back and held my palm open toward the exhaust pipe and looked for moisture, either oil or water. I observed the exhaust for a bit. Then, it was time to take it for a test drive. I placed the air filter back on, screwed it down, closed the hood and told Rick to scoot on over, I was drivin’.

While it idled, I kept my hand on the shift lever. I felt it as I dropped it into gear. I observed at what point the clutch engaged. After backing it up about ten feet, I stopped and got out and went back and looked at the ground where it had been standing. I got back in and I listened carefully as we set out. I kept my hand on the shift lever throughout the trip. I got it up to speed and took it out on the highway to see how it did at highway speed. I was monitoring the engine, the transmission, the way the car rode and handled.

At something just over the speed limit, I took my hands off the wheel to see what it would do. It continued in a nice straight line. Back off the highway, I took it around corners too fast and dropped it into the wrong gear, and came to a screeching halt while letting go of the wheel, all on purpose. Getting under way again I put it in third when it should have been in second, to see how it might handle it. I drove it through pot holes to check the shocks and to see

how it rolled. When we got back, I kept the engine running and I popped the hood again. I looked for anything that may have sprung a leak, or heated up. I checked the exhaust again, looking this time for water droplets. I peered, with one eye, along the roofline. I was pretty much just making it up at that point. I kicked a tire and grinned charmingly, but the owner had had his fill of me a very long time ago.

I took Rick aside and I told him confidentially, “You could take it to a mechanic but he wouldn’t do much more than I just did, probably less. Maybe he’d check the compression, but I’ve kinda done that already, though in an indirect way...and check the valve-set, though I don’t hear any clatter, and the exhaust is clean.” The car looked pretty good to me. As far as I could tell it was in excellent shape for a car that old.

“Do you think it could make it all the way out to California?” he asked. I smiled. I advised my friend to buy that Rambler. So Rick bought it.

A couple days later, while driving it to his mother’s house in Maryland, the thing self-destructed in the middle of the freeway.

Rick was kind enough to spare me the details.

### **BOB, NORMAN, PAUL and JANN**

In those days if we weren't going a very long distance in a car, we didn't go at all. I mean if it wasn't New York City (600 miles), or Cape Cod (further), or California (three days and nights of sleepless non-stop, tag-team driving), what was the sense of packing and climbing into a car? In those days, we took every opportunity to travel. We were walking around in New York City one very cold January morning—on our way, first to Cape Cod and then on to California—when Rick stopped me mid-stride and said, "Bob Dylan owns a couple of these apartment buildings on this block."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"We have our way of knowing these things," he assured me. "And," he added knowingly, "I understand he's a pretty lousy landlord."

"What does that mean?"

"Let's just say that he's not very giving."

"Is a landlord supposed to be giving?" I asked. "But, forget that—how do you know Bob Dylan owns one of these buildings?"

"A couple of these buildings," he corrected me.

At that point we were directly across from the White Horse Tavern as two huge black men emerged, wearing big fur coats. They stood on either side of the door like sentry. Rick and I watched as a little guy in a huge white fur coat and a broad brimmed hat came out and walked down the street with the two huge black guys pacing behind him at about three feet. It was Bob Dylan.

"Wow," I said to Rick, "You started talking about Bob Dylan and he materialized before our very eyes."

“THAT,” said Rick, “is exactly why I make a point never to mention Perry Como.” (He may have said Vic Damone.)

There were not many people of that sort (famous) who I either knew much about or felt like I cared to know much about, but Bob Dylan was one of them; so, I was happy. Went to New York, saw Bob Dylan coming out of the White Horse Tavern. So far, it was a pretty cool trip.

When we got to Provincetown, we drove out to a bar at the very end of the point (is it Stingray Point?), a place where Provincetown locals hung out. There we discovered an old schoolmate, Ed Gearing, sitting at the bar. We took a table and invited Ed over to talk with us about life in P’town. Apparently he was caretaker and child-care giver for Norman Mailer. He looked after the house, when the Mailers weren’t in town and after the kids, when they were. Maybe 2, maybe 3 beers later, Norman Mailer, who everybody knows was a Golden Gloves Champion, and who then was known locally as Provincetown’s reigning resident celebrity hard-ass, came through the door.

Mailer shoved his way through the parting crowd, swaggered over to our table, and started shouting at our friend, Ed. Ed, in response, stood up and started, defensively, apologetically, to offer a reasonable explanation for whatever the problem might have been. Norman Mailer, wasn’t satisfied. He felt it was his duty to humiliate Ed loudly and openly in this public arena. He was well underway when, inspired by the quest for justice which dwells deep within me, after three beers,

I rose to my feet, bottle number four in hand, and placed myself directly between Norman Mailer and Ed.

“Excuse me,” said Norman Mailer in a tone that any celebrity might use in speaking down to anyone who is not. He tried to step around me to get to Ed, but, as he moved I moved too, blocking his way.

“I’m trying to talk to my au pair,” Mailer complained.

I remained where I stood. (I didn’t know what an au pair was.) At that point in my life I’d never done anything like this before—although I’ve done it since, each time in the name of justice—but, when Mailer moved again, I moved again. Each time I repositioned myself so that I was between Norman Mailer and my friend, Ed. This dance didn’t last long. Mailer gave me a look which made no impression on me whatsoever at the moment, but later—after I’d heard that he’d stabbed his wife, for example—gave me much to think about.

I think Ed may have saved me when he said, “I gotta go,” and simply departed.

That left me and Norman Mailer looking at each other. He was looking at me coldly. I, inadvisably, looked down at him, bemused. I stood my ground with a silly drunken look on my face until Norman Mailer snorted, observed me for a brief moment, sneered, and walked away shaking his huge block-like head. I’m told that the local crowd sighed a massive sigh of relief...or disappointment; I wasn’t told which. At any rate they all returned to their drinks while I remained standing, bottle raised in glorious victory. I was drunk.



Rick tugged on my sleeve and said, "Mailer used to be a Golden Gloves champion, Edward."

I snorted loudly in disregard. "Yeah," I said, "and I used to be sober!" (Much of this story is pieced together from the eye witness reports of others who were seated at that table that night.)

So, at that point in the trip it was: went to New York, saw Bob Dylan emerging from the White Horse Tavern; wandered up to P'town where Norman Mailer considered cleaning my clock, but didn't; and we were on our way to California, by way of Aspen, where we stopped in for another beer, or three or four or more.

We were coming out of a place called Pinocchio's and, for some reason which I cannot either understand or explain, I had a small cigar hanging out of my mouth as we picked our way carefully, drunkenly, across the icy street toward our car. Rick, who smoked Parliaments, had no matches on him. I'm fairly certain those little plastic throw-away lighters had not yet been invented. Or, if they had they were too expensive for us dolts. So my cigar remained unlit. When Rick whispered, "Hey, look, it's Paul Simon," I got an idea.

As Paul Simon approached I pointed at my cigar and said, "Hey, buddy, you got a match?" Paul Simon said, "I think so..." and started searching through his pockets. "Wait a minute," he said, then went over to his car, a discreet little black Mercedes, opened it up, crawled around in there and emerged with a matchbook. He raised it to show us, then

tip-toed his way carefully over to us and lit my cigar. He was very very nice. I think I should tell you that.

I took a few puffs, to see that it stayed lit, and said, "Thanks, pal." I wanted to make it clear to him that I didn't know him from Adam.

"You're welcome," he said simply, then went back to his car, got in, started the engine and took off.

For some reason my own obnoxious behavior pleased me greatly. It really really pleased me (*who can explain such stuff?*) Then, back then, I was delighted by the fact that Paul Simon had lit my cigar. I was even more delighted that I had called him "Pal". Rick was amused too. So was Ginger who said, "I thought you were going to pat him on the back there for a minute."

"I was thinking about patting him *on the head*," I said, "but I'm not that drunk."

So, at that point in the trip it was: went to New York, saw Bob Dylan emerging from the White Horse Tavern; wandered up to Provincetown where Norman Mailer considered cleaning my clock, but didn't; stopped in at Aspen, where *Paul Simon* lit my cigar, and we were on our way to San Francisco. My God, what a wonderful world!

Sometime later that afternoon perhaps, I detected Ginger deep in thought. I asked her, "What are you thinking about, Ginger?" She said, "I'm trying to figure out at what point *you* started becoming such a smart aleck." It was like a blow to the head. It was like the punch Norman Mailer never threw. It was a *very* good question. How had the

excruciating shyness upon which my entire character was built become buried so deeply in belligerence? I had certainly become creative and unpredictable with a few beers under my belt. I, like Lucius, had been turned into an ass and there were no roses anywhere in sight. The question was: Had I become a permanent jackass?

When we finally ended up in San Francisco Rick said, “I want to go over to *Rolling Stone* and see if I can get Jann Wenner to assign me a piece.”

I laughed raucously. Even then *Rolling Stone*, just getting started, was a huge phenomenon and an impossible dream for writers to attempt. But, then, I didn’t know Rick as well as I eventually would.

As I recall, we went down Third Street to the old brick building where *Rolling Stone* was situated and Rick found a parking spot right in front, an impossible task even then. We went inside together and Rick asked the security guy what floor *Rolling Stone* was on. We went up in the elevator, and when we got off, Rick went over to the girl behind the desk and spoke with her quietly. There were smiles. She picked up a phone, spoke, nodded and pointed toward a set of huge wooden doors. Rick went right in. I started to follow him, but she stopped me.

“I’m with him,” I whined.

“Have a seat,” she said sternly. I sat.

When Rick came out, forty minutes later, he told me he’d be writing a piece for *Rolling Stone*. It’s really that simple. Of course, I was a bit surprised that Jann Wenner didn’t even bother to personally carry Rick out in his arms.

At that point it was: went to New York, saw Bob Dylan emerging from the White Horse Tavern; wandered up to Provincetown where Norman Mailer should have knocked some goddamned sense into me, but didn't; stopped in at Aspen where a very nice little fellow gave us a light, and went on to San Francisco where I sat out in the waiting room while Rick pulled a pretty impressive rabbit out of Rolling Stone's editorial offices.

All 'n all, it had been a pretty good trip.

## DOUBLE

I think it must have been Rick who introduced me to the daughter of the guy who owned the largest collection of contemporary sculpture in the world...which was a mistake. It was just the first of many. Before she arrived, I put in a stock of White Horse scotch because I'd been told she drank scotch. I had 3 bottles proudly displayed, neatly lined up on my buffet when she arrived.

"What's this?"

"Scotch. For you (my love). I heard that you drink scotch."

"This? I wouldn't drink this stuff."

"Oh. Uh...What..uh...?"

"Chivas or better," she said flatly.

"Well, gee, I spent every penny I had on this stuff."

"I'll buy the scotch, just don't expect me to drink *this*." She eyed the label with disdain. That was my mistake.

Her mistake was telling me that she could make me the next Larry Poons. "It is literally within my grasp to make you famous," she assured me. "I could do that. I could make you the next Larry Poons."

She meant it too. She rattled off the names of all the people she knew who would have a hand in making me the next Larry Poons: gallery owners and patrons and art critics. They were all her friends and all positioned nicely in the Fine Art world. Oh, and, of course she also knew the writers who contrived the intellectual justification for almost any act that any artist of their choosing might commit. She was the right chick in the right place to make all my little painterly dreams come true. And it made me sick; sicker than she would have been had she stooped to sip a little White Horse.

Of course, her response to being offered cheap scotch was nothing compared to my most high umbrage at being offered a lift up into a high position in the world of Art. I was disgusted to think that, through her connections, she could make any artist, in this case, me, the next big New York success story.

"I want to make it because my work speaks to the viewer," I whined.

"What?" she laughed crassly, almost collapsing under the monumental humor of that statement. I can still feel her hand on my arm as she reached out to steady herself and keep herself from falling down with laughter. "What are you talking about? Painting doesn't have ANYthing to do with that!" She looked at me to see if I was serious, and, when she discovered that I was, she laughed again.

"If that's the way it's done, I want nothing to do with it," I declared, chin up, eyes cast toward heaven, from which I receive my motivation, my inspiration, every kick in my teeth, my failure, my disgrace.

"Fine. I'll make some other guy the next Larry Poons."

OK, so that was settled.

One day we, Rick and Ginger and I, found ourselves in New York City, at this same young woman's apartment on Central Park West. I'd gotten up late and everyone else had departed for the day, leaving me alone with a guy who claimed to be a Persian Prince. He told me how his lineage went all the way back to Nebuchadnezzar or someone like that and how the great Assyrian lions that we see in our history books, carved deeply into the stone walls of ancient

buildings in and around the Tigris-Euphrates valley, are part of his family logo and how when he pisses it drifts, in lyrical script, slowly upward into the atmosphere until it forms an umbrella of pure crystalline droplets under which all god's creatures are protected from harm, and did I want to play a little backgammon? I told him I didn't know anything about backgammon. That was OK, he could teach me. I told him I didn't really *want* to learn and I didn't *care* to play, and so the game began.

What the hell, I was stuck there with this Persian prince until something better, or less arrogant, came along, and so I rolled the dice and moved some pieces about the board. The only thing of note that I can recall is that periodically he would chortle and declare, "I DOUBLE!" then he would take a cube, which sat, unused, in the middle of the board, and served no purpose that I could see, and turned it.

The game went like this. I rolled the dice and moved, he rolled the dice, declared loudly, "I DOUBLE!" laughed snidely and moved. After a bit of this he declared himself the winner and I congratulated him and got up to find myself a beer.

At this point he became cantankerous and stood up and put a hand on me and demanded, "Where are you going, my friend?"

"I don't feel like playing any more. I think I'll go try to find something to drink."

"You are not going anywhere, my good friend," he said, "you owe me \$34,000."

I laughed heartily. "What? What the heck are you talking about?"

“You have lost this game and you now owe me \$34,000, American.”

“Yeah?” I told him. “That’s funny for two reasons. The first is that I don’t HAVE \$34,000, and the second is, if I DID have \$34,000 I wouldn’t give it to you.”

Even if there was more royal blood in his piss than in my entire extended family, the guy was wildly misinformed about the nature of reality, and, on top of that, he was a jerk. He glared at me for a while, which I admit was pretty frightening—he had the moist dark eyes of an arrogant, young, irate Persian prince—and told me that it was a matter of honor and that he would pursue me to the ends of the earth until I paid off this sacred debt. “This is a matter of honor!” he said repeatedly. And he meant it. To him the \$34,000 was real; the debt was real; the game was real, the threat was real; I was real. I had my doubts about all of it.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said, “if what’s-her-name makes me the next Larry Poons, I’ll give you one of my paintings.”

I don’t recall much more about this event except that when Rick and Ginger finally showed up I grabbed Rick quickly, took him aside and whispered, “We gotta get out of this place right now, right this minute, immediately. That Persian prince moron thinks I owe him \$34,000 and it’s a matter of honor.” Rick understood perfectly, and we left New York that very evening. Of course, I’d like to say that since that time I’ve gone on to become very very rich and occasionally, in honor of that Persian prince, I take \$34,000 in cash and flush it, with great ceremony, down the toilet.

That’s what I’d like to say.



## **BARE ASSED CHRISTMAS IN KANSAS**

One year, or one just like it perhaps, we were on our periodic pilgrimage to California. After driving nonstop all the way from St. Louis, we pulled into the University of Kansas, where we thought, or had been told that everyone was on Christmas break. There was not another car in sight. The campus was empty. It seems to me that Rick knew someone there and that they had given him instructions about how we might quietly manage to get into the dorms, without detection. The only drawback that I can remember was there was no running water, except in the gymnasium. They'd shut it off during the break. So we had to sneak over to the gymnasium to do what needed doing before sneaking back and hitting the hay.

None of us (not one) slept the nervous sleep of uninvited, unregistered, unauthorized and unwanted intruders that we were; we slept like royalty in those dorms. We got up early the following morning to, once again, sneak over to the gymnasium. We were chirpy and chatty and maybe a bit loud after a good night's sleep—the glass tile does that—as Rick and Ginger and I took a long, luxurious, over-due, greatly appreciated, hot shower in the men's locker room. We emerged in a herd from the showers soaking wet, clothed only in fresh, clean, University of Kansas supplied towels, still jabbering amiably, and found ourselves face to face with the entire University of Kansas football squad. Apparently they'd remained on campus to practice for some big upcoming game.

It became immediately apparent that none of these kids had ever seen towel-wrapped Virginians before. They were

themselves in various states of dress and undress but all of a single expression; speechless to a man, they stared at us in utter disbelief. If an entire marching band had come out of that shower room wrapped only in towels the response would have been much the same. They continued to gawk, but gave us plenty of leeway as we gathered up our clothes, slipped through the horde and walked quickly out the door. As we emerged from the gym, two coaches froze solid at the sight of us, and as we walked toward our car the team began to spill out of the locker room and follow, at a safe distance of course, jabbering amongst themselves.

Nowhere in the entire history of Kansas football had such an event taken place before. We can hear the dinner conversation now. “A completely stark raving naked girl—and I do mean naked—and TWO hippie fellers with hair longer than hers, comed right outer the shower together. Goll, where they come from we do not know.”

Once we were clothed and in the car and on our way, the debate was whether they were more surprised by seeing a girl come out of their shower room or by seeing long-haired males in the sanctity of their locker room, or, by the fact that we were all in there together, boys and girls, naked with no empty kegs around to suggest a reasonable explanation. Either way there was shock all around; they weren’t expecting guests, we weren’t expecting a welcoming committee. They were shocked immobile and inarticulate, we were shocked into action.

There was no bloodshed.

## THOATS

Leaving the University of Kansas on that fine December day, we found ourselves discussing the fact that we had, to that point, never picked up a black hitchhiker. I can not tell you WHY we were discussing that—I can't tell you why we hadn't picked up any black hitchhikers either—we probably hadn't seen any—but, at that very moment, like a miracle, there he stood on the side of the road. Since we could all read the signs when they're in large enough print, we picked him up.

"Where you headed?" Rick asked.

"Where are y'all headed?"

"Los Angeles."

"Well, I ain't going that far, but I'm going that way."

So, I got in the backseat with Ginger, our honored guest got in the front next to Rick who was driving. "We were just talking about..." Ginger whispered to me. I was equally amazed.

Nothing was said for several minutes as we got underway again. Then, as if inspired, our friend the hitchhiker said, "You know, I could slit y'all's throats!"

Rick, a scholar yet still a man of action, yanked the wheel smartly and brought the car to a skidding stop on the graveled edge of the road. I leaned forward to let the guy know I was still there. Rick sighed and then spoke directly to him, "Get out of this car!"

The guy seemed honestly surprised by our reaction and responded, stuttering "I said I COULDA slit y'all's throats,

Henry Edward Fool

not I WOULD~~A~~ slit y'all thoats."

I growled, "Get the fuck (pardon me, ladies) out of this car."

He popped out, totally confused, and we drove off leaving him on the side of the road a mile and a half from where we'd picked him up.

After a few moments Rick turned to me and said, "I didn't like the way he said 'thoats'."

I agreed.

Ginger too: "There *was* something creepy about that."

We could let the coulda/woulda thing go, but saying thoats like that was expecting too much from us.

## **DAHLIA**

The only one awake while driving late at night through the Nevada desert, I was listening to the radio to stay that way. There was a talk show on, one of those things with some phony-baloney female psychologist giving free advice to drunks and insomniacs. I wasn't really listening, but the rattle of human discourse helped me to keep my eyelids from drifting closed. I don't recall now where we were heading, but wherever it was I was trying to get there very quickly.

In those days, if you were flying down the road at 80 miles per hour it wasn't like sitting in your living room with the scenery outside drifting slowly by, as it is in cars today. In those days, when you were flying through the desert at 80 miles per hour, the car was bouncing erratically, rocking from side to side, the tires on the pavement sounded like beach pebbles grinding under an incoming tide, and the headwind made continual efforts, serious efforts, to lift the entire vehicle up by the front bumper and toss it over backward onto its roof. In those days, if you were flying down the highway at 80 miles per hour there was no doubt whatsoever that what you were doing was both mindless and dangerous. In those days, eighty was scary business. In short: you were risking your goddamned stupid life (not to mention the lives of those sleeping in the back seat) and you knew it.

If you were doing that under the star-filled Nevada sky, on a long flat stretch of deserted desert highway, with the blue-black mountains ahead receding steadily (no matter how fast you went) there was a sense of eternity about it.

There was also a peculiar serenity to it. And...the only thing to do was surrender. If this kills me; I'm dead, and somehow that's OK. I wonder if this thing'll do a hundred.

That is the state I was in. That is the state in which I found myself. The AM radio doctor had tired quickly of talking to a regular caller named George, had given him the bum's rush, and moved on to the next caller. This new caller, like so many of these poor desperate people, didn't seem to understand the very basics of talking to someone on the radio with a ten second delay. The doctor patiently walked the caller through all that turn-your-radio-down stuff and through this process it became clear to the doctor, an intelligent, educated, reasonably perceptive woman now reduced to talking to idiots and speed-freaks in the middle of the night, that this caller might be an innocent. The good doctor softened her approach immediately. My ears perked up too. Innocence has always been charming to me. At that point in my life, though I'd been devastated by it before, I still had no fear of innocence.

"What's your name, caller?" asked the doctor in a kindly manner.

"Dahlia," said a timid voice, "Dahlia \_\_\_\_." The producer bleeped out the last name. Such was this woman's lack of sophistication that she didn't understand that she could use a made-up name.

"Is that what you want me to call you, *Dahlia*?" asked the doctor.

"That's my name, yes, ma'am."

"Well...OK, 'Dahlia' what can I do for you?" Innocence is a lovely thing. In this world, it can be heartbreaking.

There was a long silence during which the only sound for me was pavement grinding away under my tires. I noticed that the doctor was not pushing this caller like she had previous callers; like she had poor George for example; she was gentle; she was coaxing.

“Is there something...I can do for you, Dahlia?” she asked encouragingly.

I found myself anxious to hear what Dahlia had to say, what she might need. I mean, I can not explain (although, yes, I know that is my task here) how she had such immediate impact on me, but, whatever it was, it got to the good ol’ doctor as well. I think we both detected an uncommon purity in this woman.

“I never called anybody before,” she said painfully, “I mean, it’s hard for me to...” (She pronounced the word hord...it’s hord for me t’.)

“Well, that’s OK. Take your time; we’ve got the rest of the night ahead of us.” I glanced at my fuel gauge.

“But, um, well, the other thing is...it’s kinda *personal*” She whispered the word personal. “I mean it’s *very* personal. Um, but I don’t know what to do...elseways. I’m at the end of my rope.”

The desire to protect this woman welled up warmly inside me while she gathered her thoughts. I don’t know about the good doctor, but I had practically stopped breathing while awaiting her next words. My ears were working to pick up every nuance, every variant in her tone; I thought I could detect a fluctuation in her breathing. Had Dahlia been crying? Was she crying? About to cry? To me, flying down the highway with the dark and empty universe rolling

slowly overhead, it sounded like maybe she had been. I was convinced of it. The most artless being who had ever called in to a radio talk-show had been harmed by someone. OK, which one of you big stupid bastards has hurt Dahlia?

“Take your time.”

The doctor and I both agreed, there was nothing more important than this. Dahlia sounded skittish when she spoke next. She whispered, “I can’t talk to anyone about this... it’s ver-very personal.”

“You can talk to me, that’s why I’m here,” whispered the doctor.

“True...I don’t know what to do elseways. I’m really very sorry,” she whispered. “I heard you talkin’ an’ helpin’ the others and I thought might you could help me.”

“I’ll do my best for you.”

“Still, now I’m not so sure I can. I mean, ‘haps I shou’n’t, Fact is, I proolly shou’n’t.”

“You sound like you *want* to talk to somebody.”

“Oh, I do. I do. I really need to. I just think that ‘haps I shou’n’t...you know? There’s others involved.”

“I understand. But, you can talk to me, Dahlia, OK? That’s what I’m here for.”

“Well...”

The world waited. And, eventually, the combination of patience and gentle encouragement paid off.

“It’s my husband...”

In our hearts we urged her on.



“Since I had m’last baby, my husband doesn’t want to...be near me. He just doesn’t seem...interested, since I had m’last baby.”

“How many children do you and your husband have, Dahlia?”

“Four.”

“And did he react this way after you’d given birth previously?”

“No, ma’am.”

“And when did you have your baby?”

“It’s been more than a year...fourteen months.”

“I see. You know, sometimes a husband needs a little time.”

“He’s always been interested in me before. Times, he could hardly wait to get at me again,” she pleaded. “I guess there’s proof enough of that,” she said almost to herself. Advocates of Dahlia everywhere laughed a little bittersweet laugh. Then we waited respectfully, in silence, for her to continue. Throughout the dark starlit broadcast area I imagined hundreds of us tuned in, leaning into our radios; the more dedicated among us brushing aside our own loved ones, shushing them or running them out of the room—

“Can’t you please shut those goddamned kids up, I’m trying to listen to the radio!”—waiting, fretting, wringing our bony hands out of concern; heartsick for poor Dahlia. What after all could be more important? (Nothing.)

“He never turned his back on me before.”

“Well, have you tried to talk to him about this?”

“He won’t talk.”

“Have you *tried* to talk to him?”

“He won’t talk.” Dahlia began to sob. “When I go to talk to him, he gets up and walks out the door.” Dahlia seemed to gather herself, to steel herself; this was the part that really hurt. It came out in spurts. “He acts like...he finds me... disgusting.”

By this time my jaded heart had become fully engaged. Maybe it was the lack of sleep. Maybe it was the cold expanse of night sky engulfing me, but, I could no longer deny my perfect love for Dahlia. I loved this woman. I loved her purely. There was nothing but purity in it. Go ahead, search the corners. Purity. Nothin’ but. “Mom, Dad, this is Dahlia. Oh, and these are her four kids.” The guy out there squealin’ his tires and driving wildly around the block with his horn blaring—that’s her husband. But, he don’t want her no more, so you can just ignore him. He’ll soon tire of such antics and go back to the desert.”

Suddenly, as the little kids say with wide eyes, I was filled with the desire to find Dahlia wherever she was; driven to find her, as it were, and take her in my arms and comfort her. I wanted to tell her, “It’s OK, forget about that big stupid bastard moron husband of yours.”

“I’m sorry, Dahlia, but we’re going to have to take a break for a couple minutes right here. But, will you stay on the line? We’ll talk a little during the break, off the air.

“I don’t think I should be talkin’ at all...’bout this. ‘Haps I shou’n’t. ‘Haps this is a mistake...”

“Dahlia, please, promise me you’ll stay on the line so we can talk. I want to speak with you a bit off-air. Ok?”

“I will.”

During the commercials I was thinking about how to go about finding her. Maybe the radio station would give me her number. If I could talk to her a bit over the phone, that would be a good beginning. Then, I'd drive up to her trailer; I'd knock on that hollow-core tin door; she'd open it slowly, in tears, shaken. I'd say, "I heard what you were saying on the radio, my poor dear darlin' lady, and now I'm here to rescue you." Naturally she'd just collapse into my arms. Enfold is a nice word. I'd enfold her in my arms. Caress is a nice word. I'd caress her. She'd sob a bit and I'd cradle her head and hold her tightly until she stopped shaking. I'd comfort her meanwhile by saying, "There-there." Or, maybe, "Now-now." I couldn't decide which. "Now-now, Dahlia, now-now." Dear, sweet, lovely, Dahlia. "I know it's hard."

Flying through the desert, in the middle of the night, now with tears in my eyes (that always helps), I was busy composing my introduction. Keep it simple, I instructed myself. I'd announce, "Don't worry, Dahlia. I'll take you away from here; I'll take care of you! No one will ever harm you again." I thought that would be a good beginning. At that moment, rolling along blindly headlong into the endless western expanse, I was willing, eager, anxious, maybe even a little desperate to make this meeting happen. But, if it was to happen at all, it had to happen soon, while I was still awash in human compassion. The time was right, Dahlia was in touch with her need, I was in touch with Fate itself.

Heroically, I'd scrap all my selfish little schemes (of which I had none at the time, that I can recall), my dopey dreams

(of which I had many), in order to first find and then comfort my dear Dahlia. This was the opportunity I'd been yearning for; the chance for which I'd been aching, the reason for my being here on this big dumb clumsy planet. I didn't know how it was going to happen, but I had a feeling that it was Destiny itself speaking to me through that radio, and I was all ears and, due to a good upbringing, honor-bound. There may have been some hormones involved. "There-there, Dahlia; forget him. Forget that bastard. He comes back here again, I'll kick his ass." This is what I was thinking while the radio was hawking Babbo cleanser.

After the commercial break, when the doctor returned, my heart raced/leapt, cavorted in joyful anticipation. I could not wait to hear Dahlia's lovely voice again. I'd missed her. Then, it turned terrible. It took a terrible turn. There's no way to put it without employing that word. There may be better ways to phrase it—I'm sure there are dozens—but, really, there is no better word for it. Terrible. It was just plain boot in the crotch terrible, judo chop to the larynx, bite your own tongue off terrible.

"Our last caller, Dahlia, had to go, so, we'll be taking another caller now," the doctor said, and my heart sank. I felt sick to my stomach. I gasped. I was wounded. This can't be. This ain't right. I'd been betrayed. We'd all been betrayed. How could you do this to us? How could you have let her go, you *idiot*? You goddamned *idiot*! It was so completely unfair. I had plans. Big plans. Important plans. WE had plans; Me and Dahlia; Dahlia and me; kids, goats, gold flecked, turquoise counter tops, linoleum floor, cold beer. I probably could have learned to enjoy pro wrestling!

I could have developed a fondness for rodeo. I could take up smoking. I could drive a Ford pick-up. Whatever it might take to make it work, I was willing. Cowboy boots.

At that moment, I really thought it could work. I believed I was being, actually, sorta reasonably realistic about things. There was more to life than college...which was where I was headin', where I'd end up...if Dahlia and I didn't hit it off. Picture us sitting under the striped awning of our new-to-us Airstream trailer, sipping something cold and soothing with the goddamned endless, dry, useless desert all around, just sand and hopelessly withered greyish vegetation as far as the weary dust-filled eye could squint. Are those crickets I hear, or something very much like crickets; the desert version of crickets? It's not anything dangerous is it? Let's not get picky. Let's not get too hung up on detail. Dahlia and me, that's what I'm getting at. "Dahlia, please please please let me buy you some new house slippers...you can't keep shufflin' around here in those old worn out pink mules; think of the kids."

But she wasn't coming back to me. I'd been cut off, cast out, alone. And, without Dahlia, I needed to face certain undeniable facts. I had to face the callous indifference of Life (that's *one*); the crushing impassivity that surrounds me (which is sorta like *one* as well), surrounds us all (still kinda *one-ish*, I admit), and the deep emptiness within (that's *two*). There's always that. Weep with me here, if but briefly. Concentrate on that deep emptiness within thing. I'd like to stick the word 'hollow' in there somewhere too, but it doesn't want to go. That aside, I felt helpless; I felt lost, I felt staggered. Too repetitive perhaps, but good lord,

I was tired. Realizing that I could do nothing whatsoever to help that good woman, I turned off the radio. It was over. I'd have to return to RPI after all. Still, it had been kind of a nice dream, Dahlia and me, sittin' in a tree, somethin' somethin' I. N. G. For now I need a M. O. T. E. L. L. E.

Just one more thing and then, no more Dahlia, I promise. You'll find this revealing though. That night, I did finally find a cheap motel for us to sleep in. Something with a huge green neon cactus flickering out front. Nothing says "Come on in. Get a good night's sleep!" like a big prickly saguaro. There were cheaply framed pictures of cowboys on horseback hanging precariously on the pine-paneled walls, and, for some reason I could not fathom then and can not even now, cheap plastic long horns stuck out above the bathroom doorway. I slept like a baby though. Those long horns didn't worry me.

When I woke up the next day, I had been refreshed. I felt unusually pleased with everything and I had the energy of a tiger. It was a remarkable feeling. I SPRANG out of bed and stretched like the young animal I was. I went outside hungry for life and took in a bushel of air. The air was sharp and cool and clean, the perfect environment for the way I was feeling. I shielded my eyes from the afternoon sun, and nodded appreciatively at the blue mountains all around. So that's what you guys look like. They were as far away as they'd been three hundred miles ago, and every bit as smug. While waiting for Rick and Ginger to gather all their stuff, I tossed my bag with alacrity into the back seat and discovered that the car had a flat tire (driver's side, rear). So, naturally, all that tiger energy, the joy, the hunger

for life, all that crap just drained right out of me. As it soured I reverted to my normal sniveling self. I stomped around to the trunk to find a jack. For god's sake, did I really think I could replace Dahlia's salt-of-the-earth husband? Was I going to drag my weary ass out of bed each morning at dawn and drive my rattling old pick-up truck 37 bumpy miles to the shop and spend 10 hours on my back dismantling transmissions and welding broken rear spring plates?

What a farce! I probably couldn't make it through one miserable grease monkey minute let alone a lifetime with a perpetually pregnant, wonderful as she might be, wife.

I wasn't fooling anyone, Dahlia deserved better than me. I cringed at the thought of her seeing me stomping around in that motel parking lot, cussing and slamming car doors. I was very much in the moment, as they say, and the moment was a pain in the ass. This is what happens when you're brought up to believe the world is your oyster. "What's wrong with you?" Ginger asked as I struck out wildly at the fender of the car with the tire iron.

It took two good, solid whacks for me to vent my ire.

So that you might continue to believe there is some justice in this world, I offer you this token:

I bruised the palm of my hand during my childish fit. For a couple of days I thought I'd actually broken my little finger.

## **JUST US SAVIORS (Thoats II)**

Back in Richmond, Rick and I were up very late one night in his second floor apartment on Grove Avenue. It was always quiet in that part of town at night, except for the rare passing car. We were laughing hysterically, actually, literally rolling around on the floor laughing over who-knows-what idiocy, when we heard a commotion outside. There was shouting and what sounded like threats. Rick went to the window on his knees, peered out cautiously, and saw, in the distance, a guy running down Grove Avenue in our direction. Rick turned, motioned to me and I crawled over and had a look. In the distance, through the tree tops, we could see two guys on some other poor fella's heels. Rick got up, went over and turned off the light. Then we both ducked down and sat in silence with our backs against the wall. We wanted nothing to do with this, whatever it was.

I suppose the guy chose our building because he'd seen Rick's light blink out. We heard the sound of him bounding up onto the old wooden front porch; the downstairs door creaking open and slamming shut; footsteps coming quickly up the stairs. Next, there was a quiet tapping on the door, and a moral debate began, mimed in urgent silence. Should we let this poor guy in or not? The tapping became louder, more frantic. We broke into whispers. I recall hissing out the conclusive convincing argument. It went something like: "I don't know whether or not we are all brothers, but I do know we can't just sit here and listen to some poor guy being disemboweled in the hallway right outside your door ...can we?"



Apparently, we couldn't. We didn't. Rick got up and went over to open the door. A nervous, skinny, older black fellow slipped inside quickly, threw his back against the door and put a bony finger to his lips. He stood there breathing heavily, slumped against the door, while we carefully monitored the approach of the hunters by their shouts, on the street below.

I scooted across the floor to the opposite wall and sat there taking it all in. Rick took a few steps backward and lowered himself quietly to the floor beside me. The stranger locked the door and Rick and I looked at each other.

"Great, now we're locked IN with some desperate black guy!" I whispered. Things got suddenly worse when he grabbed the bottle of wine we'd been drinking and, in one frighteningly skillful motion, shattered it against the leg of the iron bed. He then sat on that bed with that vicious looking weapon clenched in his fist. There were glass shards and wine all over the floor—and Rick and I were numb with fear. What had we gotten ourselves into?

Lambs at slaughter, we looked at each other. "Great, NOW we're locked in with an ARMED desperate black guy!"

Outside, his pursuers had slowed their pace. They were making their way down the street methodically, like hounds, sniffing at every door and calling out threats. Rick and I were frozen, helpless. Neither one of us was sure what was going to happen. I was wondering if this black guy understood that *we* were on his side; that *we'd* just helped him. I was also wondering what this guy, whom we were sheltering, had done to inspire such dedication to his capture. We all listened intently as his hunters drift past us

and continue on. We sat in silence, ears cocked for a very long time after that.

I don't know about Rick, but I was convinced that this guy was now going to cut us up and leave us in bloody chunks amidst the glass and wine on his apartment floor. When it was clear that the hunters were not returning, our guest cautiously slipped out the door, taking the broken bottle with him. Rick and I crawled over quickly to the window on our knees to watch as he emerged and ran down the sidewalk in the direction from which he'd originally come.

This entire event lasted half of an hour maybe, if that, and at no time during that time was I convinced that either Rick or I would live to see the next day's glorious breaking dawn. After our guest left we stayed up talking about what had happened until we fell asleep exhausted.

I don't know whether that guy owes us his life or Rick and I should be thankful he didn't take ours. I don't know who among us had the most fear, or was the most grateful, or had faced the greatest danger or had been shown the greatest kindness. Like I said, We're all brothers and blah blah blah.

And another thing occurs to me; the guy was barefoot.

## MARGARET

Her name was Margaret. I guess that comes as no surprise to anyone who has ever known a Margaret. She was standing outside a bar, smoking a cigarette, looking many more than her 18 years when I wobbled drunkenly by and asked, "Are you alone?"

"No, my boyfriend is inside."

"Wow," I slurred, "He must be some kind of an idiot."

"My boyfriend is no idiot," she said blowing a smoke ring.

"My boyfriend is 26 years old, and he could crush you with one hand, and he's definitely not an idiot."

There seemed to be nothing I could say to that and so I took the opportunity to say nothing. It was only about 2 AM and the night still lay ahead.

"But," said Margaret after a casual puff or two on her cigarette, "why did you say that?"

"Why did I say your boyfriend must be an idiot?"

"Yeah, you know..." she whispered encouragingly.

"Because, if you...were my...girlfriend, I wouldn't leave you standing around out here... by yourself where someone like me might come along, scoop you up, and carry you off."

(There was no doubt about it, at 2 AM under the neon bar-light glow, Margaret was a beauty.)

So, you must have already guessed the rest. Twenty minutes later we were at Margaret's place and she was nicely barely-clothed, and had just finished reciting poetry to me. I wish I could think of a more creative way to say that. So, it looked like a good beginning. I mean, the clean

film-noir pick-up, the sneaking up the squeaky old wooden stairs without waking anybody, the rolling seduction of recitation, the candles, the suppressed giggles of delight under the blanket, and, ultimately, my discovery that I was skilled at something I'd never done before, which coincided perfectly with Margaret's discovery that I had more natural skill than her 26 year old abandoned and now almost forgotten boyfriend... who was not an idiot.

## LARRY

A friend of mine, Frank Cole, asked me one day if I'd like to feed his landlord's dog twice-a-day for two weeks, at \$20 per day. My rent at the time had jumped to \$35 per month, so, I told him I would. It was supposed to have been his job and I forget why he was handing it off to me, but I could certainly use the money. So I went over to the place with Frank and he introduced me to his landlord's truly lovely wife, and the landlord's truly lovely wife introduced me to the cheerful little dog—a small, black, longhaired, fox-like creature with a perpetual smile and cartwheel eagerness. His name was Larry.

In those days dogs had names like Rex and King and Bounder and Rover and Rocky and Pumpkin, Blackie and Spike and Spot. None of them that I knew of were named Evelyn or Robert. So, Larry was an interesting name for a dog. The closest I had come to such a thing before was...my father had a friend with a Chihuahua named Señor Dog. Señor Dog had a wife, Mrs. Señor Dog (sadly, they had no children).

I was given keys to the place, instructed how to, and how much to, feed the dog and asked to let him out into the back alley immediately after feeding him his evening meal. He'd scratch at the door when he'd taken care of things and wanted back in. I was asked to put the empty dog food cans outside and not to allow them to accumulate. Several times during our little talk I was tempted to ask why these folks were willing to pay so extravagantly for such a simple task, but didn't. The truly lovely woman showed me an additional \$100 in twenties sitting on a table in the living

room “in case something should come up.” On top of these bills was a note of instructions reiterating what she had already told me, along with how to reach them, in case something should come up, and a veterinarian’s name and number, well, you know, in case... There was a well-used deck of playing cards on top of all this, as a kind of paperweight.

On the first evening, after feeding Larry and letting him outside, since I didn’t know how long he’d be out there, I sat down and looked at the list she’d written. At the bottom was a note: “If Larry becomes restless, you can play Deuces with him. Just please pick up the cards when you’re done.” This note had been penned originally for my friend who obviously knew how to play Deuces. I looked at the deck of cards but couldn’t imagine how good ol’ Larry and I might put them to use. When I went back to the kitchen he was already there scratching at the door. I apologized to him but he was having none of it. He went straight to the living room. I closed the door, locked it and followed. I thought it would be rude to just feed him, poop him, and split, so I sat down in the chair next to the money and cards and talked to him.

He sat looking up at me intelligently, comprehending not only what I was saying but seeing right through it. “I’ll give you twenty minutes,” I said sighing like a martyr. “So, what do you want to do?” He continued looking at me as if surely I must know the answer to such a simple question. He stared into my eyes urging me to think. When it became clear that I wasn’t getting it, he emitted something between a whine and a whistle, stood up, and pointed his nose

toward the table. Then it occurred to me—Deuces. Of course.

I opened up the deck of cards and he started wagging his tail wildly. I pulled the cards out of the package and he barked once for encouragement. I shuffled the cards and he started bouncing up and down on his front legs. I was on the right path for sure. But then I didn't know what to do next. So, I placed the cards down on the table, hoping he might tell me, but Larry just cocked his head. He couldn't believe anyone would lead him along this far just to let him down. He emitted another whining sound, sat and stared at me. The matter had taken on some urgency. He was spring-loaded and ready to explode into action, only my thick-headedness was holding him back.

I took the deck of cards and put them on the carpet face down. He looked at them, then looked at me. He began pacing and whining. It occurred to me that he might have to see the face of the cards to play, so I turned the deck over and Larry went nuts. He pounced on the deck of cards with both feet and started digging his way through them in a joyous fury. I watched as he did this, scattering cards all over the place. When he was done and sat down again, looking completely satisfied with his performance, I was startled to see that he had separated out two cards...both deuces. The 2 of spades and the 2 of clubs lay off to one side, a foot away from the other cards.

I thought I was imagining things. They were kinda together, sorta by themselves, but it could have been a coincidence. (Deuces...) While gathering up the cards I

was chattering mindlessly to Larry. “That’s a pretty good trick, Larry. Where did you learn that?” I was saying as I re-assembled the deck. “You think you could do it again?” He sat and wagged his tail and waited eagerly to perform.

When I had the entire deck in hand I started shuffling the cards and Larry let out a bark as before and stood up. He was ready. I was ready myself but, I held up a palm. (This is the way we must be with dogs). I set the cards down on the carpet again. “Wait...Wait...” I said. He was ready to explode but he sat, he waited. “OK!” Larry started digging wildly through the deck of cards with both paws. I was watching carefully trying to spot the deuces as they were separated out. There’s one... and...there’s another. This time there was no doubt because, after he was done, he actually nudged one of the deuces closer to the other with his nose. I was stunned. I told Larry, and quite honestly too, “That’s one of the neatest things I have ever seen.” I was giddy as I patted him repeatedly on his little rock-hard head.

I couldn’t get enough of that. I watched him paw through that deck of cards a dozen times—each time separating out the black deuces—before I left there that night. Of course, during the weeks that followed, Larry and I played Deuces hundreds of times, and I told everyone I knew about him. Many of them didn’t believe me. A couple of them, liars, said they didn’t think it sounded all that special.

Meanwhile, I spent hours, days, restless nights, trying to figure out how I could teach Larry to separate out the red deuces as well, or maybe deal himself a flush, but my mind



just isn't built that way. I settled for imagining what a joke it would be if, after my stay, the owners came home to discover that Larry was now separating the entire deck into suits. Alas, it was to remain only a dream. Larry, as smart as he was, just couldn't see the red 2's. Why, I don't know.

At the end of my dog-sitting stint I was anxious for Larry's folks to get home, and I happened to be there when they came through the front door. The landlord went right past me and down the hall without saying a word. His wife, more lovely than before, came into the living room and Larry started jumping all over the poor woman as if he hadn't seen her in weeks. She, down on one pretty knee, asked between licks if everything had gone well. I started gushing about Larry's sleight-of-paw, but she just stood up, thanked me and paid me in crisp twenties from her purse. Larry ran from the room when he heard his master coming down the hall toward us. She followed him out there and found herself embroiled in a heated discussion of some sort. I took the opportunity to slip quietly, cash in hand, out the front door.

Of course I was anxious to find out about these people and Larry's ability with a deck of cards. Frank told me that the guy had been a drug dealer and while sitting around one day he decided to teach Larry to do some card tricks. Unfortunately, the first time the dealer tried this trick, a speed freak was the victim of the ruse. And, as Frank told it, *that speed freak flipped completely out* when Larry selected the 2 of clubs out of a scattered deck. The guy stood up and pulled a gun, and first threatened to shoot the dealer, then decided it might be more appropriate to shoot

the dog instead. He couldn't decide. He ended up declaring that maybe he'd just shoot everybody, including himself. Why a dog selecting the two of clubs from a deck of cards should have this effect on a speed freak I did not ask. In those days such behavior explained itself. But, apparently this event was enough to convince the dealer that maybe he should just marry his girlfriend, get out of the drug business altogether, and go into real estate.

The crisp twenties made me question the *get out of the drug business altogether* part of the story.

## **A COUPLE DAYS WITH ALICE D.**

I've had LSD in my system three times, that I'm aware of. Twice it was "slipped" to me by some criminally well-meaning imbecile; the time I took it myself willingly was the most frightening. In those days, word was that a certain album (Alice Cooper? it may have been Captain Beefheart, or even something more obscure...you tell me) had a tab of acid under the cover. I'd heard that. Everybody had. And, one day, while fumbling with this album cover, just admiring the graphics, I discovered a tiny little circular lump under the surface in the back. Whoa! What's this?

I took an Exacto knife out and surgically removed the lump, and it did, in fact, prove to be a little pink tab. It was a certainly a compressed pharmaceutical product of some sort. So, not being an acid taking kind of guy at all, but thinking that it might hold some value for someone who was, I put the tab aside. I was sure that at some point down the road I'd give it to someone, or throw it away, or just forget about it, or remember it but forget about where I'd hidden it, or who knows? It didn't matter all that much to me. Time passes. Things change. Things go well; things go badly; things go nicely; things go bad again; things go quickly; things go slowly. Somewhere in there—on a bland kind of useless day—I decided that IF I found the right person to split it with, we'd take the tab of acid together. It was a romantic thought.

So, on another fine day, with nothing better to do, I dedicated myself to finding someone who might want to drop this acid with me. I spent the entire morning and part of the afternoon looking for Susan Ensley—who I knew it

would have the very least effect on. The next thing I knew—us kids being what we were—I'd taken the thing by myself, alone. As soon as I realized I was tripping I purposely avoided mirrors, but, acid being what it is, I still found myself in danger. I was hallucinating pretty heavily, and I didn't really take to the relentless pounding drums that followed me wherever I went. I was frightened and I needed to get quickly to someone I could trust. So then, by what miracle I do not know, I found myself at Joanie's place and I told her that I was sick and worried and frightened and I needed to go to a hospital. Incapable of explaining precisely what was wrong, I somehow managed to form the phrase, "I did some bad acid."

The drums seemed to be speaking to me, and they were telling me horrible things about imminent catastrophic earthly events. That's as close as I can come to it. Of course, for a kid who had spent most of his college career convinced that he was not going to live to see the age of 25 such fears were somewhat undignified. If I had been true to my own convictions I should have taken the opportunity to climb up to the top of a very tall building, position myself clingingly to a spire and shout, "Pound on, ye drums of doom!" Then I would have laughed in a hysterical/maniacal (you choose) manner and sadly/ proudly (your choice again) whispered, "I knew this was going to happen," before casting myself off. But I didn't. I still like the image though.

I'm pretty sure, fairly certain, that Joanie was not the very proudest that she had ever been of me at that moment, as once again I proved what a mess I was. But she, did her

duty as a true friend, and took me to the campus police. While driving me to the hospital, this big beefy redneck with the shaved head, this campus cop, told me, "I do NOT like what you did." I don't know how or why what he was telling me cut through the drums, but it did, and, it stuck with me. "In fact," he said, looking at me in the rearview mirror, "I HATE what you did." He waited until he could hold it back no longer and concluded the thought, "But, it's my job to get you to a doctor and to see that you get treatment." I was not so stoned that I did not recognize a hero when one spoke to me in earnest in good old plain American. His statement cut through all the rest of what was going on in my greatly distended mind...I admired the man for his principles.

We arrived at the hospital and a *specialist in bad trips* ...such were the times that a southern university had a crew of doctors who handled bad trips...took me aside, into a little room, and asked, "What's your name?"

I said, "Name?"

He said slowly distinctly, "Your name; do you know your name?"

I said, "I don't even know what *name* is. What is *name*?"

He told me, "It's a word, or a couple of words that each person has that identifies him as an individual. It's a word that stands just for you."

"Oh, OK," I said. I thought about the concept.

"Like, my name is..." He looked down at the pin attached to his smock as if reading it... "Doctor Hartley. Louis Hartley. That's my name. We all have one. That's Nurse Simms. Her name is Nancy."

“Wow,” I said, “I like that idea!” It did sound like a very good idea at the time. “I REALLY like that idea!” I said with delight, but I had no idea whatsoever what my name might be. I liked the idea that I had one though.

He helped me take out my wallet and found my driver’s license—a couple more ideas which I also found absolutely fascinating. “Your name is Edward,” he said.

“Wow,” I said, “I like the sound of it.”

“That’s you,” he said pointing a finger at my chest.

“Man,” I said, “This is such a GREAT idea.” I couldn’t get over the inventiveness behind it. “I really like it.”

I looked at him dumbly for a while waiting for the next step in our adventure together. While he asked me questions about what I had taken and how long ago and what it had looked like and what was going on in my head, I continued to marvel at the name thing. The drums, by then, had somewhat diminished.

“Look,” he said, “I’m going to give you something that should neutralize the hallucinations a little bit for you, but it won’t do anything about whatever the acid was cut with. With luck it was cut with something simple, like speed.” He gave me a shot.

Then he said, “I want to show you something,” and he lead me to a room where a young woman my age was wrapped in a straight jacket and ramming herself against the walls of her little cell, screaming in horrible fear. “You want to avoid that if you can,” he said to me. I was astounded at his insight; I DID want to avoid that. This guy seemed to be reading my mind.

So, then the doctor took me out into a room where Joanie was waiting for me and he said a few things to her before he handed me off to her. He turned to me, put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Is there anything else you feel you might like to know before you go?"

"Yeah. First though, thank you."

"That's OK, that's what we do here."

"No, but really, thanks."

"That's OK. Was there something else?"

"Yes, can you explain how these *names* are selected?"

He laughed genuinely. "I think your friend here will be able to do that for you on your way home."

Then, we just walked out the door.

The drums were gone completely and things were looking pretty nice outside. As we walked away I asked Joanie, "Do they just let insane people walk away like this all the time?"

As we walked I looked up at the palm trees that lined the boulevard, and I asked Joanie, "When did we arrive in L.A.?" She answered sweetly, but she was obviously concerned. Later that day the hallucinations ended and I discovered that the acid had indeed been cut with speed.  
..... I didn't sleep for three days.

## WAR AND CAFE

When I was the age of the kids who now run the world, the old folks were in control and they made that clear in every possible way. For example I recall one time when 250,000 of us (35,000 by official accounts) made an attempt to shut down Washington DC. What most of us wanted to do was to send an unequivocal message to the President of the United States that our opinion counted for something, and that, in our opinion, the United States of America was conducting a vicious, stupid, unproductive and immoral war over there in Viet Nam. In our innocence we thought that The President might take our presence on his door step as a sign that the American People were possibly beginning to get a little disenchanted with that war.

But, after being told about the little gathering outside, The President, a politician not a psychic, sent the lowest underling he could find outside with a microphone to tell us to shut up and go back to wherever we had come from or be arrested. In essence his message to us was that our opinion on the matter did not count. Then, almost immediately, without further warning, they came at us in hordes, like wasps, on Vespas, with helmets and night sticks and tear gas, and, after driving us to ground, rounded us up like cattle, arrested every goddamned last one of us, and threw us into Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, which made an excellent make-shift prison for anyone whose opinion bore no weight whatsoever but rankled nonetheless.

That said, for additional proof of who was in control, we need look no further than Lawrence Welk or Lucille Ball. Their continued presence in our lives sent the clear,



unequivocal, pie-in-the-face, message that our opinions, our ideas, our desires meant *nothing* to those in control. Though we were the largest segment of the population (and I believe we still are) what our generation might have liked to see on TV did not matter; the old folks were in control, and, like it or not, where there should have been Iron Butterfly (or at very least Peter, Paul and Mary), there was Lawrence Welk; where there should have been Firesign Theatre, there was I Love Lucy. Game, set, match, Old Folks!

Sometime around 1969 (I'm guessing here) I had come home during a break from college, and one evening, the President of the United States was on TV loudly, vehemently, denying that U. S. troops had ever crossed over the border and entered Cambodia (or Laos—I forget which). Apparently crossing that particular border was forbidden for reasons which I didn't understand at the time...and have never cared enough to think about since. I was, then, as I am today, basically apolitical and so, relatively uninformed and both pleased and somewhat proud to be so. I was certainly saner than I might otherwise have been because of that stance. Nonetheless, I felt compelled, during this particular speech, to stand up in my parent's living room, point an accusatory finger at the television, and state unequivocally, "That bastard's a liar." Then I strode out of the room in a kind of overly-staged, morally superior huff. That's the way we did it in those days. It was all very dramatic.

My father, who had landed in Normandy and who had a hand in driving the Nazis back into Germany, and who

would some day receive the French Legion of Honour for his part in that selfless task, followed me out of the room, clapped a fairly meaningful hand upon my skinny shoulder, spun me around, looked me squarely in the eye, and demanded to know what could have motivated any son raised by him to make such a statement about the President of the United States. Basically what he wanted to know was how an Art student—a kid who divided his time, in relatively equal parts, between painting, sleeping, and fornicating—could claim to know anything at all about what was then going on in the Vietnam War.

I have to admit that it did seem a little weird for me to imagine I might know as much as the President of the United States about a war I only wished to avoid. But, I am basically an honest guy and basically apolitical and, actually, despite my purposeful *un*-involvement in the matter, I did. Perhaps I didn't know more, perhaps I didn't know as much, but I knew the truth. My accusation was that the President did too; he just wasn't revealing it.

In those days I really wanted nothing more than to be left alone to paint and to smoke a little dope and drink an occasional beer, and sleep with whoever wanted to sleep with me. And, somehow through that process, just a few days before heading home, by chance, a small group of us artists-hopeful spent a couple of weird evenings with a young soldier temporarily back from that war. He was telling anybody who would listen—and that was us—that not only had we gone *into* Cambodia (or Laos...I forget which) but, that such incursions were regular and on-going. He knew this because he'd taken part in them.

Apparently, from what this soldier told us, whenever our guys crossed that forbidden border, they carried no picnic baskets.

So, between accepting what the President of the United States said on TV, and the word of a soldier who had just come back from over there, I chose to believe the soldier. After the fact, it proved to be the correct choice, because years later what he'd told us proved to be perfectly true, and everybody, whatever their previous stance on that matter, had to admit as much. When I told my father what the soldier had said to us his ire was quelled. He too preferred the word of a man in uniform over the unblinking insistence of any beady-eyed politician. Still, it was several years, I think, before he came around to accepting the idea that Presidents lie to us, admittedly sometimes for good reason, as a matter of course and the rest of 'em (senators, congressmen, governors, mayors, councilmen, dog catchers) are just a bunch of greedy self-serving liars.

In the print shop, while pulling stone lithographs, I overheard two graduate students discussing the war. One of them said: "Vietnam is like...You're making your way down a stairway in the dark and you bump into somebody and knock them down a flight of steps. Then the lights come on and you discover it's your grandmother. So, you knock her down another flight of steps. And that continues. You continue kicking your grandmother down the steps until you find yourselves both trapped in the basement, up to your waist in mud and soaked in your own blood." I had no idea what he meant by any of that, and I didn't know if

it was a good analogy or not, but I liked the way it went together and I still remember it clearly.

The other grad student laughed and said, “Vietnam is like...You hear that some people you’ve never seen or even heard of before are having a little family argument in their kitchen on the other side of town. So you get on a bus, and after a very long and uncomfortable ride, you decide to walk the final 14 blocks in the blistering sun. When you get to their place, you kick in the back door, rush into their kitchen and, after putting yourself in between these people. Wait. Wait,” he said. “THEN...” he said, “then, you get on the phone and start calling people asking them to come over and take your side.”

I thought about what they were saying, and since I knew as little about that war as anybody else, came up with an analogy of my own.

So, you’re sitting on the bank of a river when a pick-up truck pulls up and a couple of big guys in cheap suits grab you and force you into the bed of the truck at gun point. You are forced to shrug on some ugly overalls while you go bouncing down the highway. You shout, Where are we going? And they—APPARENTLY—don’t hear you. You shout, Where are we going? and they say, ‘Never mind, you’ll find out when we get there.’ They drive you out into the country somewhere, hand you a gun and kick you out into an open field. Before driving off, almost as an after thought, one of them leans out the window and shouts, “By the way, they’re twins...” The other guy winks and says, “Don’t shoot the wrong one.”

Anyway, armed with my own unwavering view based on nothing, that is how I felt about that particular war. And, not that it matters, but many other people shared that view, probably based on the same solid information.

So, the year my lottery number was 109 and they drew up to number 108, feeling desperate and even a little frightened, I drove my motorcycle 120 miles to a sympathetic shrink in the outskirts of D.C. and had myself declared paranoid schizophrenic. Paranoid, in my case, meant I thought that I might be sitting beside a stream one day and a couple of big guys wearing cheap suits might come skidding to a dusty halt beside me in a pick-up truck. Schizophrenic meant that I didn't want to find myself out in a field somewhere with two twins—one of whom wanted to kill me, and the other with doubtful loyalties—when I could be playing with pretty young college girls and slapping paint onto canvas with my chin properly elevated and every drop of my own blood un-spilt.

In short, I was torn.

***An Interlude:***

My father landed with the 95<sup>th</sup> Division, 377<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment on Omaha Beach in Normandy in August 1944. Shortly thereafter, the 377<sup>th</sup> Infantry faced 103 consecutive days of combat without relief, and suffered the highest number of casualties in the 95<sup>th</sup> Division; they also received the largest number of combat decorations. During that time, against heavy resistance, the 95th Division re-captured first, the forts surrounding Metz, and, on November 22, the city itself.

Lieut. General G. S. Patton, Jr. recognized the good work that the 95<sup>th</sup> Division had done in a commendation stating, among other things:

*In the course of this attack you successfully (1) made four assault crossings of the Moselle River at its high flood stage, (2) penetrated the line of defending forts, reducing those necessary to accomplish the mission, and (3) greatly contributed to the destruction of an entire reinforced German division. Against these fortifications which had never before in modern times fallen by assault, in terrain favorable to the enemy, and under almost intolerable weather conditions of rain, flood, and bitter cold, your officers and men met a most searching combat test which required not only individual courage, skill, endurance, and determination, but also sound tactical judgement (sic) coupled with an insatiable desire to close with the enemy. This achievement has added luster to the glorious history of American arms, for which you and all the officers and enlisted personnel of your division and attached units, are highly commended.*

Later these good men came upon a small village and found themselves immediately involved in a skirmish with the Germans holding that place. They were exhausted because they'd traveled hundreds of miles and had liberated 160 cities, town and villages along the way. They were cold, because it was the dead of winter. This particular village was somewhere in the war-torn region that could have been either Belgium or France—in war, I'm told, such things are often confused. Wherever they were, just minutes after the Germans had been run off, the battle won, and the last shot fired, two women emerged from a farm house nearby and came slogging through the frozen mud to them. One of them carried a tray full of porcelain cups and the other carried two large steaming kettles, one in each hand. After the first woman had given each soldier a cup, the second came along right behind her and poured hot liquid simultaneously from the two kettles. (You'll see why my eyes are welling up with tears in a second.)

My father says that was the most wonderful thing he'd ever tasted. He said he will remember it for the rest of his life. The fact that it was just a few days before Christmas made this gift all the more remarkable to him. "What is this?" he asked in French, and the woman said, "It is café au lait, Monsieur." As my father tells it, you could see the smoke from the fire fight still hanging in the chilled air, the resound of the final shots had not yet died completely in the hills beyond, when these two good women emerged with their rattling porcelain cups and hot liquid gratitude. It would be impossible to paint a nicer picture than that.

A footnote: When my father received the Legion of Honor for having “played a significant role in the taking of the heavily defended fortifications in the area of Metz”, M. Francois-Xavier Tilliette, Deputy Consul General of France, Los Angeles, referred to this same story in his speech. He followed it by saying, “Our message, Monsieur, is a simple one, but it could not be more heart-felt: Merci...thank you.”

If, at that moment, my eyes had not been already full of tears, that certainly would have done it. I’ve always considered it an honor to be my father’s son.



## **The GROVE AVENUE REPUBLIC**

I was crawling in through the back window having just come down from the roof and Mrs. See was there to meet me. She was angry. “Bill,” she said, “No up on roof. NO up on roof.” She wagged a finger.

I said, “OK. I’m sorry, Mrs. See.”

She said, “Bill? OK? No up on roof.” She wanted a firm commitment.

I said, “I’m sorry, Mrs. See,” and started to walk by her. At this point Mr. See was coming up the steps to see what was going on. She told him, “Bill up on roof.”

Mr. See shook a finger at me, “No roof.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. See,” I said, “I won’t do it again.”

Mr. See disappeared down the steps again shaking his head, but his wife remained. She called my name, “Bill?” I was standing at the door to my room now, I looked back. “No up on roof, Bill. No roof.”

“OK, Mrs. See. I’m sorry.” I went into my room, and if it had had a lock I would have locked it. Instead, for the next hour or so I would sit there on the floor in silence with my back against the door hoping that I wouldn’t hear the sound of cops arriving at the top of the stairs.

Three days earlier I’d gone out in the morning and found a loose crowd had gathered on the corner to watch a small band of young belligerents, all dressed like washing machine repairmen—muted work shirts, matching work pants and work boots—as they came marching with marked defiance right down the middle of Grove Avenue. My guess is that there were no more than twelve of them. They were marching in the direction of campus. They were

chanting something catchy but not so catchy I remember it. The crowd seemed to like them though. They seemed to be in awe of them; some of them ran forward to join them.

“Who are these guys?” I asked someone.

“The Weathermen,” he told me and in one clever step moved closer to the action and further away from the complete idiot who didn’t know the Weathermen when he saw them.

In fact, I was more of an idiot than he supposed. Not only did I not recognize the Weathermen when I saw them, to make things far worse, I didn’t care. And by that I mean, I really, honestly did not care. When I tell you that mainly, in those days, I just wanted to be left alone to work on my painting, I’m telling you the truth.

Of course I knew that the Weathermen were serious radicals, but I want to say this as clearly as I did one drunken night when I told a lovely young lady, “I am not THEN, and was not NOW a political am-nimol.” That remains true today. I am not, then, a political am-nimol (hopefully never will be). Still, I knew the Weathermen had something to do with riots, burning cars, the FBI’s most wanted list and blowing up government buildings; which lead to riot squads, police dogs, people beaten at random, arrested en masse, and frightening, senseless mayhem wherever and whenever they showed up. I didn’t think that was going to happen in the Fan District of Richmond though; Richmond was, for me at least, a land of painters and poets and long wavy-haired, willing young lovelies.

If I had to choose between the two fragments: The hippies, with their peace and love, their beloved pot, their music, and their vans scrawled over with the dayglow warning, “We’ve Come For Your Daughters” and the anti-war crowd, with their petitions, leaflets, placards, marching, chanting, bricks and bottles and pipe bombs, I’d have sided with the self-proclaimed goofballs. In fact I didn’t really relate in any way to either of them. I never once used the word groovy, and only went to DC to observe the generation I’d been born into. It must be said: I liked solitude; I liked paint: I liked the library. I liked warm girls. I liked sleep. That’s the world I was immersed in, willingly. But I could not ignore what was going on around me, so, I watched as the Weathermen marched by, and that was that.

On campus, when I came around the corner that day, there were loudly chanting students carrying placards and picketing in front of the RPI cafeteria. They didn’t wear work clothes, but they still looked pretty serious. Crowds were also gathered in chanting clumps in front of the library and administration building. Somebody standing on a stone wall had a bullhorn, and from time to time he’d blare out something inspiring, which I could not understand, and the throng would all raise their fists in the air and shout something incomprehensible in response. I asked someone in the crowd for an explanation and was told that they wanted things. They wanted Afro-American Studies; they wanted more women’s studies; they wanted RPI to take a public stand against the war in Vietnam.

Here comes Steve Podlewski. He’s got his apron rolled up in one fist and he’s already wearing that funny little paper

hat they make you wear when you're working, in utter disgrace, in the cafeteria.

"Where are you headed all dressed up?" I ask.

"Goin' to work," he says matter-of-factly.

"Well, you're gonna have to fight your way in." I said.

Steve just shrugged. "You're not going to cross that picket line are you?" I asked, not that I cared about such stuff.

Then Steve Podlewski said something which I will never forget. He said, "When these people are finished *playing* revolution they're gonna be hungry. It's my job to feed them." I watched Steve Podlewski, a quiet man of action, as he walked right through the screaming protestors and on inside. Even though I was indifferent to the cause, incapable of seeing either side actually, I was impressed. Later on I'd go through that picket line myself, just as Steve predicted, not because I was taking a side, but because I was hungry. I knew there was food in there. I wanted some. First grade arithmetic.

It was about three days later that I found myself up on that roof. I'd looked out onto Harrison Street to observe the day and noticed that the park below was full of people. There were cops' cars parked in every direction near Grove Avenue, which I couldn't see entirely from my vantage point, and I could hear mayhem; screaming and shouting and someone giving orders over a bullhorn. I must have been pretty solidly involved in my painting because I hadn't heard any of this from inside my little studio until I opened up that window to get some air.

Finding this scene curious, and wanting a better view, I went out the back window and climbed up the fire ladder to the roof and over the brick barrier that separated See's Laundro-Mat from the apartment building next door. And I went to the edge of that building and looked down upon the action.

This is what I saw. The cops had Grove Avenue closed off with squad cars parked nose to nose and there were cops in riot gear down there swinging night sticks around wildly at kids (for that is what we were) who were taunting them. The cops had a few vicious looking dogs on leashes; the leashes were stretched out to their limits; these dogs wanted to bite themselves a few hippies. There was a banner hanging over the street declaring "GROVE AVENUE REPUBLIC". Kids were throwing things and screaming and there was debris all over the street; obviously this had been going on for some time. Some clever fellow had, in the midst of all this, managed to crawl forward and spray paint the word "OINK" in large awkward letters on the side of one of the squad cars. That was pretty good, I thought.

As I was watching this from my safe perspective above, a kid who I had never seen before appeared silently beside me. He looked down; he pried a brick loose from the parapet; he took aim, he fired that brick down upon a cop in riot gear. The brick hit the cop, knocking him to the pavement. The kid then ran off, leaving ME up there alone. Another cop, while assisting his felled teammate to his feet, looked up to see who had thrown the brick. He used his nightstick to raise his face shield to get a clearer view and, as I stood there dazzled, he looked directly at me.

There was no way that I could possibly explain to that man, at that distance, what had happened. No gesture would have helped. Sticking around so he could get a more lasting impression of me didn't seem like the prudent thing to do either. So, I ran from that spot. I leaped over the brick barrier between the two buildings and I ran across the roof of the Laundro-Mat and climbed as quickly as I could down the metal ladder. As I was crawling back in through the window I looked up and saw Mrs. See. She was angry. "Bill," she said, "No up on roof. NO up on roof." She glared at me and stamped her foot. I said, "OK. I'm sorry, Mrs. See."

So, this is where we came in.

I sat in fear, with my back against the door to my room, for hours. The knock never came.

The following day the college newspaper came out with several pictures of *the riot* on the front page. The largest was a shot of the squad car with the word OINK sprayed on the side of it. There was a shot of the banner hanging over the street declaring Grove Avenue Republic and a couple shots of what looked very much like police beating kids who cowered attempting to defend themselves from the blow of their nightsticks. The story, what I read of it, began by stating that the police had been attacked by this angry mob. I thought about that.

I asked myself this question—going into battle, how would I prefer to be equipped? Would I choose: a t-shirt, torn jeans and worn-out sneakers, and arm myself with jeering,

chanting and pebbles? OR, would I choose body armor, helmet with face shield, walkie-talkie to coordinate my movement with the rest of my similarly attired team, with the added help of a helicopter over head, and arm myself with vicious dogs, a night stick, a gun—with other guns available to me in my nearby car, tear gas and water cannons? It was a tough question. You had to feel sorry for the poor cops being attacked so savagely, as they were, by a mob of unruly kids.

Still, I don't know how it came to that; the last time I visited the Grove Avenue Republic I had been drawn by the tribal rhythms of the Grove Avenue Republic Spontaneous Assembly Rhythm Band sitting curbside, thirty-some strong. Howard, seeing me coming, made room on the curb and handed me a stick and a tin can.

I tried to go back to staring at my painting, but my work was disrupted by political thoughts. I had to think that, on the motivational level the cops probably had the advantage as well. Let's say you're a young person living pretty much casually, pretty much hand to mouth, eating, sleeping, drinking, smokin' a little dope, going to school once in a while, sleeping with every pretty little girl that passes by and catches your eye, and for some unexplainable reason you get it in your head that a bunch of fat, pink, self-serving lawyers in DC, dressed in suits with badly chosen ties, do not represent you. Your motivation is ephemeral at best. It might be reduced to something as lame as the slogan, "Down with the Establishment!"

Now, let's say you're a cop and your world view is pretty much that everybody, EVERYBODY, is a criminal or, at very least, a potential criminal, and these goddamned long-haired college kids are the worst of the lot. Up until this very moment you've been operating under restraint; laws and that kind of crap have prevented you from just cruising up and down the streets and knocking all their goddamned heads in. It has to be frustrating; you've got the weapons; you've got the equipment, you know you've got societal approval, but the authorities above you have you on a short leash. You've only managed to harass a few of these little bastards, occasionally, from time to time, managed to throw some of them into jail for no reason, and, maybe, you've gotten away with beating up one or two on the side. Now, today, here you are facing hordes of the arrogant little bastards and the word comes down from above that it not only OK to swing for the fences, it's an order. You've been ordered by the Chief of Police to lay into them and leave a real mark. Who in their right mind would overlook this opportunity? Wow what a glorious day this is! That's what you call motivation.

To add kindling to the fire, some smart ass has spray painted OINK on the side of your squad car and there's a skinny little fucker up there on the roof who just chucked a brick down and hit Dwayne on the shoulder.

After this calm analysis it was pretty clear to me who had the advantage, motivationally speaking, in that little tussle, on that golden day.



All that aside, I pretty much sat out the war in my studio and in the library and in the cafes, and in the bedrooms, and I was despised for it by some.

One afternoon shortly after the fall of the Grove Avenue Republic I was sitting in a café, out on the sidewalk under a striped awning. It was a beautiful day. The somewhat bulky middle aged woman behind the counter wanted to make it clear that she did not like me though, and, as per her instincts, took my order in crushing silence and delivered my coffee with sloppy, clattering disapproval. Perhaps her son was in the war; perhaps her husband had been. But, *she* wasn't and *she* hadn't been, so I ignored her. IF she had slammed down my cup and rushed off to catch the next train leaving for the front I might have had a more sympathetic view. As it was the spilled coffee meant more to her than it did to me since she'd be trying to get the stain out of the table cloth after I'd left, and re-fills were free.

Who can say why, given the choice between sitting in the shade of that awning, sipping coffee while reading weighty tomes on visual perception, or, traveling to a distant land to play cowboy and Indians with live ammo and vicious natives in THEIR homeland, I chose to remain there in the Richmond shade? I may have been driven by selfishness, but I was certainly driven by the most basic of all human drives, self-preservation.

All I knew for sure was that my heart no longer beat proudly like a big bass drum when I heard the national anthem of my country and since the first day I arrived at RPI tears no longer filled my eyes when I saw our flag fluttering against a clear blue sky.

Henry Edward Fool

On that day—my very first day on campus—I witnessed a shoeless frightened kid being run down by an unmarked Ford. When the bumper of that car had him pinned up against a chain link fence, four guys in cheap suits wrestled him to the ground and started beating the living daylights out of him.

These were the good guys.

Four grown men. One skinny, frightened kid.

His crime: he wished to quietly explore the inner workings of his own mind.

Four grown men.

## **FARET'S**

It was funny that if I double-parked in an empty alley to load up paintings, a cop car would appear behind me almost instantaneously with the lights flashing and the megaphone blaring, "Move along," but if a limousine was abandoned diagonally on Lombardi, blocking both lanes in front of Faret's, while the driver went in to lean on the counter, chat and tell vulgar jokes, passing cop cars would squeeze by somehow and continue on. Maybe they'd wave...maybe they'd wink. Everyone knew.

Faret's was an interesting place, a tiny hole in the wall, with a counter on one side and booths along the opposite wall. They served filling, inexpensive breakfast and so-so lunch to people like me, people without much money or direction in life. At any given moment there might be six or eight people in there eating, most of the time it was empty, but that didn't keep the owner from driving a brand new Cadillac. On the one hand, I wished I knew Faret's secret, on the other hand, I wished only to eat my eggs and get out. I had the feeling that's what Mr. Faret wanted from his customers.

For breakfast they had the usual stuff. For lunch you could either have something from the breakfast menu or you could have one of the pre-made sandwiches that they put together behind the counter during the breakfast hours. Do I know why junkies and painters and drunks and perverts ate breakfast at Faret's? I do. We ate there because it was cheap and filling. Do I know why almost nobody ever bought a sandwich there during lunch? I know what Howard told me—that Faret's sandwiches weren't your

typical sandwich. He told me that you could, if so inclined, walk in and order a salami sandwich and they would take one off the top of the stack of pre-made, pre-wrapped sandwiches that sat on a shelf behind the counter. The guy at the register would charge you a normal price and you'd walk away with a mediocre salami sandwich.

Howard told me that it would be 'instructive' if we just went in there and watched one afternoon. So, since I had nothing to do on that day...or ever for that matter, we went. Howard had a beer and I had...I thought I'd be clever and order a ham sandwich. If there was something funny about the sandwiches, I thought I'd find out first hand. It came wrapped, on a plastic plate, and it was just horrible. Howard and I were sitting there talking about other things when a car pulled up out front and parked in the middle of Lombardi Street. No attempt was made to take the perfectly legitimate and obviously available parking spot right in front of the building. The driver came strolling in and said, "Hey, Nick, how bout a tuna and apricot sandwich?"

The guy behind the counter, fished around in the stack of sandwiches and found a tuna and apricot and gave it to the guy. The guy paid for the tuna and apricot sandwich then stood around chatting amiably with Nick for a bit before strolling back to his big shiny car and driving off in a big hurry. Howard smiled knowingly and slouched in the booth.

"See?" he whispered over the lip of his beer bottle.

I nodded. But I didn't... I didn't see. But, I continued to watch. After a bit, I became bored and antsy and wanted to

go, but Howard encouraged me to stay. He nodded his head in the direction of the counter saying "Just watch." I watched.

After a bit another car pulled up outside showing total disregard for anything that might be considered parking regulations. The driver got out and hurried in. Nick and the driver nodded to each other. Nick was picking his teeth with a toothpick at the time and had one foot up on something, perhaps a keg of beer, perhaps the counter. He raised his chin as if to say, "What can I get you?" The driver looked around and then addressed Nick loudly, somewhat nervously.

"What kinda sandwiches you got today?"

Nick said, "You don't KNOW what kind of sandwich you want?"

The driver seemed nervous. "Yeah, I know, but I just forgot that's all." He leaned on the counter and said quietly, "Help me out here, will you?"

Nick glared at him. "Hey, I'm *tryin'* to help you out. First, you gotta tell me what kinda sandwich you *think* you might have been sent here for, if I'm gonna help you out. I can't go pawin' through all these sandwiches til I find one that suits you."

"I forgot," the guy said, "You gotta help me." He sounded truly frightened.

Nick sighed sarcastically and said, "Alright. Alright. Who might this particular sandwich be for?"

"My boss."

Nick said, "Hey, everybody's got a boss. How'm I s'posed to know who your boss is? I never seen you in here before."

The driver looked around a bit and leaned over the counter and said something quietly. Nick said something back to the driver. The driver said, loudly, “You got any Sparagus sandwiches?”

“Asparagus...let me see here.” Nick dug around in the stacks of sandwiches and sure enough, there was an asparagus sandwich in there. “Yes,” he said proudly, “we do happen to have asparagus today.” He handed the asparagus sandwich over to the driver who started to go out the door.

Nick stopped him, “Hey! You plan on paying for that sandwich?”

The driver laughed sheepishly and came back and slapped a bill on the counter. Nick and the driver exchanged looks and the driver went out the door.

Howard finished his beer and seemed anxious to get out of there, so we did. You probably know this by now but I’ll say it anyway. I’m slow. I’m naïve and I’m slow. It would be difficult to say whether I’m slow because I’m trusting or trusting because I’m stupid, but I still didn’t get it. Howard refused to clue me in. This kind of thing was foreign to me. For god’s sake, I was a middle class white college kid who spent most of his time focusing on figure/ground equivocation and warm to cool shifts. What did I know about sheepskin sandwiches? All I knew about Faret’s was that you could get a pretty good breakfast there for a dollar thirty-nine, and you didn’t have to leave a tip.

Howard met me at Faret’s one morning a few days later just before they closed after breakfast. At that time they threw everybody out of the place, if there was anybody in

there, while they made up the sandwiches for lunch. When they asked (told) us to leave we went out and hung around outside the window, watching as the guy behind the counter made sandwiches. I had to admit he was pretty quick; he was throwing together sandwiches at about 3 or 4 per minute. He first made a maybe a dozen sandwiches and wrapped them in paper and wrote on the wrapper with a magic marker. After that was done, he went into the back room and emerged with a paper bag. The guy making the sandwiches never looked up from what he was doing. Meanwhile, Howard and I were outside watching; it might as well have been a television show.

When the sandwich maker turned the paper bag upside down bundles of cash cascaded down on the counter top. He looked at a piece of paper, assembled a sandwich with cash in the middle, wrapped it and marked it. Then he looked at the little slip of paper, made another sandwich filled with cash, wrapped it and labeled it. Howard was looking at me, grinning. I was watching all this, sheep-like. The guy was oblivious to our presence just 16 feet away on the other side of the window. If he looked up, we were dead. When he came to the door and opened up for lunch he seemed surprised to see us there.

We went to the counter and sat. The guy got behind the counter, tied on an apron, and came and stood before us.

“Yeah? What can I get you?”

I said, “You still making pancakes?”

“Yeah, you want pancakes?”

“Please.”

The guy yelled, "Evelyn! Short stack." He turned his focus on Howard, "And you?"

Howard said, "I can't decide."

"Yeah? Well, you let me know when you decide," said the guy and turned his back on us.

"I've decided," said Howard.

The guy turned toward us with a toothpick in his mouth and raised his chin.

"How about one of those money sandwiches?"

The guy looked at Howard. He sighed deeply. He flicked the toothpick down onto the floor and came and stood directly in front of us, (need I add threateningly?). He placed his hands behind his back and bowed toward us, sticking his face maybe three inches from Howard's and said, very low, "What did you just say?"

Howard said cheerfully, "I'll take one of those money sandwiches."

At that point Mr. Faret himself came bursting through the swinging door that lead to the kitchen, demanding, "What did he say?"

"I'll take care of this, Boss," said the guy behind the counter, but Faret pushed the guy aside, practically knocking him down in the process.

"No, I'll take care of this." He looked at Howard coldly.

"Get out of this establishment and don't EVER show your face in here again, Howard."

"All I want is a money sandwich," said Howard laughing. Meanwhile the guy behind the counter had put his hand on a gun and placed it on the counter in such a way that neither Howard nor I could ignore its presence.



“You,” Faret said to me, “I don’t want to see you in here either, not for two weeks.

“You,” he said to Howard, “I don’t want you in here ever. Not ever again.”

The guy behind the counter rattled the gun against the counter surface as Howard and I left. Howard was laughing as we emerged onto the sidewalk. I was shaken, probably ashen, definitely perspiring.

“Maybe I should have asked for a fish-face sandwich,” said Howard.

“Do you know that guy, Howard?”

“Nah,” said Howard with a shrug, “But he knows me.”

That statement, and the smugness with which Howard made it, caused me to realize that Howard could be a dangerous guy to be hanging around with.

I don’t know if Howard was ever welcomed back at Faret’s but I couldn’t wait for the two weeks to be up. There were really few places in Richmond that would serve me, or which I could afford. After two weeks I did go in there one afternoon, and they gave me breakfast. Faret was walking around and just keeping an eye on things in general—he seemed distracted—but he didn’t seem to notice me in particular. While I was eating a frightening thought crossed my crazy mind, maybe, after I was done eating, I’d order a money sandwich to go and then run for it. I didn’t, that’s why I’m still around to tell you this.

Still, I couldn’t keep my eye off that stack of sandwiches behind the counter.

## MONEY AND DIPLOMAS AND RECKLESS DRIVING

I'd just spent that afternoon at the comptroller's office. They wanted \$35 from me before I would be allowed to attend graduation and receive a diploma. The wide, gull-eyed woman squatting in a muumuu behind the desk was cold and precise. The matter was pretty straight forward. Pay the \$35 and get my diploma or don't pay it and don't get it. It clearly made no difference to her.

My point of view was this (imagine my ire here): They wanted me to *pay* for the *labor* of fixing a hole in a wall, but that hole *was never fixed*. More idiotic still, *the building itself* had been since *torn down*. (continue imagining my ire, if you will...)

"You're demanding that I pay you \$35 to fix a hole in a *wall* of a *building* which *no longer exists*?"

"If you do not pay this fee, your diploma will be withheld and you will not graduate."

"Does that mean I will not get my degree?"

"It means that your diploma will be withheld."

"Does that mean I won't have a degree?"

"You will not be allowed to *attend* graduation ceremonies."

"I don't care about the ceremonies. Will I or will I not have a degree?"

"Your diploma will be withheld."

"I'll have a degree but I won't have the piece of paper that says I have a degree? Is that it?"

"Your diploma will be..."

"May I talk to that guy?" I pointed at the overly-large, nicely polished, imported hardwood door with the gold lettering saying: Office of the Comptroller.

“The Comptroller?”

“Yes. May I talk to him?”

She sighed and looked at me, shook her head as if I could not possibly fully understand what I was asking or what I was about to get into; there was some rolling of the eyes. She pressed a button on her desk...despite her naturally protective nature. After some whispering, I was escorted inside.

He had a nice office and he had a nice desk and he was nicely dressed but that's where the niceness ended. He was a bearded ugly guy with big pink ears, yellow skin, and massively framed eye glasses. He asked me what he could do for me and I explained that I was being asked to pay \$35 to fix a hole in a wall which had never been fixed in a building that had been torn down years ago and that I didn't think that was either fair or reasonable, and that, in fact, it seemed UN-fair and UN-reasonable for them to withhold my diploma because of that.

He mulled. The fingers, the beard, the eyes were all involved in this. He pushed a button and asked the gull-eyed woman in the muumuu to bring my file in to him. She did, and handed it to him. He looked it over in a strange off-hand sort of way.

“You put a hole in the wall of 935 Park Avenue the first week of your arrival here.”

“Four years ago, yes. I was pushed by another kid and my elbow went through the wall.”

“And you were told at that time that you would be held responsible.”

“Yes, but that wall was never fixed. Two years later, I took advanced printmaking in that same building, and that hole was still there. The following year that building was torn down...and that hole was still there. It is now an empty lot.”

“I see,” he said. “Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do about this. If you refuse to pay this ‘fee’ you will not graduate.”

“I will not graduate?”

“You will not receive your degree.”

“I will not receive my degree?”

“You will not receive your diploma.”

“The piece of paper?”

“The parchment.”

“Does that mean I will not have a degree?”

“It means that you will not have your diploma.”

“Does that matter?”

“I’m afraid I can not answer that question.”

“Well, can you answer this one then: Why am I being charged to fix a hole that was never fixed in the wall of a building that no longer exists?”

To my surprise he had an answer. “Balance...” he said.

“It’s on our books; funds were issued on your behalf, we wish to recover those funds before you leave us.”

“You know what? You should recover those funds from the maintenance department. They’re the ones who were paid and didn’t do the work. I’m telling you that hole was still there a couple years later when that building had become the stone-lithographic studios and it was still there on the day they tore that building down.”

We glared at each other—well, no, I glared at him, he looked back upon me with cool aristocratic indifference. That went on for a while. Then I departed in defeat...of sorts. So, after I finished my four year stint at Richmond Professional Institute, due to a monetary dispute, I did not receive a diploma. I did land a job as a part-time janitor however. The same high level educational institution from which I'd just graduated—or not, who knows—hired me to mop floors. With no diploma, it seemed like a reasonable option.

In those days or thereabouts, for some reason which can not be explained, I sold my 1957 Mercedes Benz 190 SL and bought a new motorcycle. The motorcycle was a 650 cc Triumph; it was a beauty. It might be of interest to note that the Mercedes Benz would be worth something between \$80,000 and \$120,000 these days, the 650 Triumph would be worth...less, possibly worthless. But, I was young and I wanted a motorcycle, and I suppose I was short-sighted (and by that I mean stupid).

I was the ONLY white guy on the cleaning staff. I may have been the only guy with a high school diploma. I was certainly the only guy who had four years of college, and unquestionably the only guy pushing a mop around on freshly sparkling floors of classrooms in which I had very recently attended class. So, it was important work; I was breaking down some real social barriers.

Some of the young male janitors had motorcycles, little things; I think the largest was maybe 250 cc. They lined them up proudly, defiantly, at the curb under the shade

trees out in front of the brick building where us janitors started and ended our shift each evening. After work these kids would climb on these little muh-muh-muh-motorcycles and z-z-z-z-zip off speedily. One day, pay day, instead of walking the four blocks to work I rode my 650 Triumph and parked it at the end of the line of these Tinker-toys bikes. Beside them my bike looked like a MONSTER. So, after collecting my paycheck, I went over and climbed on my monster bike and kick started it and, after revving it a few thunderous times, took off like a bat out of hell.

My guess is that it was 60 yards to the point where Grove Avenue splits off to the left and Park Avenue ambles off to the right. By the time I had to make that decision I was already in fourth gear and going FAST. I swerved left, saw that the light ahead at Harrison Street had changed to yellow, gunned it, ran the red light and flew like James Dean down the lovely tree sheltered straight-away known as Grove Avenue.

I was moving at a pretty good clip and quite proud of my performance—I'd made impressively smooth shifts. Now, long out of sight of my fellow janitors, I thought I'd better slow down. That's what I was thinking when I noticed a flashing light in my mirror. There was a cop car back there eager to pass, so I slowed down and pulled to one side of the street so he could go by...but he didn't. He didn't go by. He didn't pass me. Instead he bumped his siren a couple times and announced over a bullhorn, "Motorcycle rider, take a left turn at the next corner and pull over."

I did as I was told. I got off my bike, removed my helmet and waited.

He sat inside his car doing something which I could not see and when he got out, slowly, he stood there near his car for a while writing in a note pad. He did not look at me as I approached him. Instead he reached inside his car and got his hat and put it on.

“What...uh...what...?” I began humbly.

“DO NOT say a word,” he instructed me.

“But...”

“DO NOT say a word.” He continued to write. When he was done he asked me to sign something, handing me the pad, and I did. He tore a copy of whatever it was off and handed it to me.”

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked in complete innocence.

He looked at me. He squinted to determine if I was being some kind of wise ass, but couldn’t really decide. He said, “Thirty five in a 15 mph school zone, running a red light, speeding in a restricted neighborhood, crossing a double yellow line, speeding—60 mph in a 30 mph zone—reckless driving. failure to yield, failure to pull over, failure to use proper signals. In Virginia you can go to prison for reckless driving,” he said, “Let me see your registration for that device.”

I had it in my nervous shaking hand.

“Let me see your driver’s license.”

I had that too.

“Do you want Tuesday or Thursday?”

“Pardon me?”

“Do you want to face these charges in court on a Tuesday or a Thursday?”

“Thursday,” I said.

He handed me my driver’s license and registration back.

“Do you want 12:30 or 2:30?”

“Twelve-thirty,” I said.

“That’s Judge Langdon,” he said with a smile. “Langdon takes great pleasure in throwing people in prison for reckless driving. See you there.” He tore off something else and handed it to me. He then got into his car again and out the window he said, “Oh, and I strongly recommend that you do not exceed the speed limit anywhere within the city limits of Richmond with that device anytime between now and your court appearance. IF you do, we will confiscate that device, and you will go directly to prison. If I were you, young man, I’d park that thing and walk home.” Then he drove off, slowly.

So, you know, that was kinda what the hippies in those days called a bummer. I was scared to death. Judge Langdon takes great pleasure in sending people like me to jail.

The next day, when I arrived at work, I was a hero. I was a HERO. People were clapping me on the back and shaking my hand and calling me brother and just standing around at a distance grinning widely at me. I was a HERO.

Apparently that cop had been on my tail from the very moment I took off and the entire cleaning crew had witnessed the event from the beginning until I disappeared,



like a rocket, out of sight under the overhanging trees of Grove Avenue.

*They believed* that I'd seen the cop.

*They thought* I knew he was there.

In their minds I was challenging that cop to catch me.

I was a hero. Suddenly the long-haired, white kid was all right; more than all right. "Man, you are one mothuh-fuckin' crazy-ass son of a bitch, m' man," one guy laughed into my ear as he clung drinkin' buddy fashion to my shoulder. He seemed to speak for everybody there. I never could have dreamed that people who had been so indifferent to me, or resentful of me, just one day earlier could find me so irresistible.

"Man, you is allllll-right, Edward! We were sure we were never gonna see your ass again." They were convinced this crazy-ass white boy was on his way to jail. And, I have to tell you, the crazy-ass white boy thought so himself. But, no, I'm too fast; TOO FAST; no lazy ass cop gonna catch THIS part-time crazy-ass janitor! At that moment, awash in weird triumph it seemed very cool to be me. I didn't know what lay ahead.

It wasn't so cool to be me on the agreed upon Thursday morning when I arrived downtown at the courthouse. When I walked in the cop picked me out of the throng and made a point of coming over and saying, "Yep, we got Judge Langdon. He's thrown thirty people into prison for reckless

driving this year so far. I got a feeling you're gonna be thirty-one." Being able to convey this information seemed to fill the man with tremendous delight.

I went into the courtroom and signed something and took a seat in the audience as Judge Langdon called case after case and handed down huge fines and jail time and even had a guy taken away immediately in handcuffs. When someone called my name I stood up weak in the knees and went up to the bar like a sheep to slaughter.

Judge Langdon looked down on me with cruel eyes under a stern unforgiving brow. "Let me see here," he said. "You were caught exceeding the speed limit in two separate zones; you ran a red light; you rode on the wrong side of the road; you ignored the demand of the officer. Where is the officer? OK. You'll have your turn in a minute, officer. You ignored his order to pull over, evading arrest, that's what we'll call that, for here, for now, and worse than any of this, you did it all with an overall and complete disregard for the safety of anyone else who might have been on that road at that time—we'll call that reckless driving." He looked down at me. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

I said nothing. I kept my head down and I said nothing. "These are pretty serious charges," he said. "Can you tell me why you were acting in this reckless manner?"

"It was pay day, uh, Sir, uh, Your Honor."

"It was pay day..."

"And I was feeling kinda good...Uh, and, you know, uh, everybody was watchin'."

“You had just been paid and you were feeling spunky because everyone was looking at you. So, you thought you’d put on a little show for these people?”

“Yes, Your Honor. I was, you know...feeling pretty good.”

He stared down at me for a long time while I cowered before him.

“What kind of a motorcycle is this we’re talking about?”

“A 650 Triumph, Sir.”

“Yeah. And how long have you had this motorcycle?”

“About three months I guess...sir. Not quite.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” he said, “The law is the law, and I’m going to have to...”

The judge raised his gavel and held it aloft for a bit. “Oh hell,” he said, “Case dismissed!” and he brought that gavel down. With the sound of that clack tears of joy filled my eyes. Tears of joy.

Although the people I worked with had really enjoyed my one-man-motorcycle spectacular, the administration of the college was not so pleased to hear bout it.

## SLAW

After I'd been unfairly dismissed as a part-time janitor by the college I'd graduated from, I quit everything. I just dropped it all cold. I stopped painting and cut myself free of the nagging goddamned relentless burden of writing; I took a solemn oath that these things would no longer be a part of my life. (That commitment lasted, possibly, two heartbeats.) I recall one painful/powerful, brave/stupid, honest moment when, inspired by who knows what noble thought, I lugged boxes and boxes—thousands of pages of precious, semi-precious and utterly useless typing—from the garage where I lived and dumped it all in a dumpster behind the restaurant where some friends worked. I just tossed it all in there along with cabbage leaves and egg shells and other refuse. Even as I committed my stuff to the deep, like all idiot-writers, I remained convinced that someone was bound to come along, find that stuff, see the true, undeniable value in it, publish it at their own expense, such would be their conviction of its greatness, under their own name, and, such is the insight of the great reading nation in which we live, gain a sudden, large, voracious and thoroughly devoted readership.

After the scribbling had all been dumped and the paintings all given away (the motorcycle had since been stolen, in a manner of speaking), I was taken in and given work in the little restaurant where they used to hand me sandwiches out the back door. It was owned by two guys who rarely showed their faces in the joint; managed by a well-known junkie, who had hired me; there was a big bear-like amiable Irish drunk behind the bar, a fastidious little Swiss chef at the steaks and stoves, a big-boned red-neck prep-cook,

named Alma, and then there was me. I was the kid with a brand-spanking-new Fine Arts degree, alternately splashing around in soapy water, and slamming plates and pans around, and rattling the silverware.

Somehow this combination of folks worked neatly, we all got along well and it was just one big happy family. The exception was Alma, the prep-cook. She seemed captive to a slow-winding, perpetually downward-spiraling, snit. Bitterness wafted off her in chilling waves. Uninviting is a word that comes to mind. She always arrived, ghost-like, long before anyone else, and went straight to work. During her shift, she did what was asked of her with marked discontent, saying nothing to anyone except when absolutely necessary. When the night was over, she left in smoldering silence. For her, life was grueling and unbearable, and I think she had no qualms about contaminating the rest of us with that philosophy.

Here's something worth note (and by that I mean, laughable, and by laughable I mean embarrassing). At that time, for some reason which can never be explained, I was convinced that *silence* could only be the result of drinking deeply from the common cup of ancient archetypal wisdom. That's the sort of thing I was stumbling around town sputtering about in those days. Now, of course, I'm not sure I even know what I might have meant by that, or if I believed it. After having met Alma however I was beginning to have my doubts. Her silence was like a sledgehammer. It didn't really seem to well up from the benevolently flowing spring of innate wisdom running subconsciously throughout all mankind.

I guess I don't need to caution you at this point to keep in mind the fact that I was then an idiot. As if to prove it however, one day I got it in my head to befriend this hulking bitter presence called Alma. Maybe it was the mindless syncopation of the dishwasher's endless clanking task that allowed me to have such stratospheric thoughts.

I thought it would be prudent to start out simply—"Hi, how are you today, Alma?"—and see where it went. I don't know what I imagined the results would be. It was a lofty goal, no doubt, but I wasn't expecting to make monumental changes in either of our lives, only hoping to make our confinement together a little more bearable. It was a small kitchen.

On the chosen day, when I arrived, she was already bent over the chopping counter grating carrots with a fury. I leaned up against the stainless steel sink for a while and watched in amazement. I'd never seen anything like it; she was grating carrots with incredible speed...and it was a truly remarkable thing to witness. She was possessed. The timing didn't seem entirely right, but I'd made up my mind, so I decided to wing it. "Wow, Alma," I said with admiration, "How do you do that so quickly without cutting yourself?" She stopped, straightened up, turned to face me. She looked at me, studying me as if I might possibly be the stupidest goddamned creature god had ever created, and said, "You put *carrot* in there 'stead of *fanger*." Then she turned and went back to her work.

I never spoke to her again. She never spoke to me again.

I like to think it was her choice.

When the restaurant closed each night, and the shade was drawn down over the glass of the front door, we all hung around drinking and carrying on. Alma was never there. When the owners threw their first anniversary party to celebrate the success this strange crew had brought them, Alma wasn't there. When they threw a Christmas party for the employees, Alma wasn't there. One of the owners, we'll call him Brian (that may have been, in actual fact, his name), while raising his glass to his workers, looked around and said, "Where's Alma?" One of the waitresses said, "Who's Alma?" Someone else said, "She couldn't make it." Brian said, "Well, here's to all of you. So far, you're all doing a wonderful job at making us two guys rich; I'm sorry Alma couldn't be here." While we drank I heard someone else say, "Who's Alma?"

If I were Dickens (and I guess by now you've figured out that I'm not) I'd say, then we all lifted our glasses to Alma. But we didn't.

The next day we all arrived at work to find Alma already at her station grinding corn, or some goddamned thing, with a steady silent fury. "We missed you at the Christmas party," the chef said pleasantly. Alma looked at him and said, "I don't think they delivered enough cabbage; if we're gonna make our usual lot of slaw."

## NO MOSS

We were sitting on the front steps in the sun, three junkies and me, when a guy came by and said, "Do you want to go see the Rolling Stones?" We looked around at each other. I don't know, do we? "When are they playing?" someone asked off hand. "WHERE are they playing?" someone more clever cut in.

"They're up in DC tonight," said the guy, "Do you want to go?"

"How many tickets do you got?" someone asked.

"I'll give you as many as you want. How many do you need?"

Someone started asking each of us if we wanted to go. I said no and he went inside to see if anyone in there wanted to go. Meanwhile the guy just stood there looking bored. When our friend came out he said, "Nobody in there wants to go. So I guess it will be just us three."

At that point Henry said, "Come on, Edward, why don't you go with us?"

I said, "You know, it's not the kind of thing I do. I'm trying to work out some things on canvas..."

Jim spoke up, "Come on, Edward. It's *the Rolling Stones*, man!" Then he turned to the guy with the tickets and said, "How much are the tickets?"

The guy shrugged and said, "They're good seats. I think they're like \$120 each or something."

I squealed, "\$120! Who has \$120?"

"No, man," said Henry casually, "They're worth \$120, they ain't gonna cost us nothin'."

"How's that work?" I asked.



“We’ll take four tickets,” Henry told the guy. “And you’re goin’ with us,” he said to me.

“When can you get ‘em to us?” asked Jim.

“I’ll go get them and bring them right by,” said the guy and took off.

“What’s the deal?” I asked.

“Never mind. You don’t have to know,” said Jim. “We want you to go with us; you’ll have a good time. It’s *the Rolling Stones*, man!” Jim slapped me on the back.

“It’s tonight. How are we going to get to DC tonight?” I asked plaintively.

“Never mind. You don’t have to worry about that either. We’ll get there.”

We sat in the sun for awhile just, you know, sitting in the sun, until the guy came back and handed us the tickets and said, coldly, “Enjoy the show.”

After he departed I asked, “Who is that guy?”

Jim said, “Faux Tete.”

I said, “A foe’s tet? What?”

Henry shrugged and said, “He’s a breaker.”

“A what?”

“You know a breaker.”

“A breaker?”

“A trap door.”

“A trap door?”

“A puppet, a shadow, a mask, a beard, a false face.”

“A false face?”

“A schneedle,” said Jim laughing.

“A schneedle. Now I know you guys are making this up.”

“No, man, he is. He’s a schneedle.” Henry said this so seriously that I knew, at that moment, without a doubt, that

they were screwin' with me. I just didn't know how much. My tendency was to only believe about 1/3 of what came out of those two, but then, who goes around handing out free tickets to the Rolling Stones?

Meanwhile Jim had gotten up to go inside to coach Margaret. I could hear them in there. When she came out I asked her, "Do you know that guy who just gave us the Rolling Stones tickets?"

Margaret looked at Jim, got the encouragement she needed and answered, "You mean the schneedle?"

I laughed and said, "Come on, Margaret, is that guy really a schneedle?"

"That guy," said Margaret, "was born a schneedle!"

(Margaret was always pretty cool.)

Margaret and I were the only non-junkies on those steps that day and we knew something which no one would ever guess—these junkies, when they were not lying to you or trying to manipulate you or stealing from you outright or holding you at gun point, were truly good people. So, I suppose I saw in them the very same value my parents saw in politicians. I was thoroughly entertained by their attempts to entertain the gullible likeable non-heroin-shooting dish-washer kid who sat, protected, among them. Did I neglect to say, strike my jaded thankless heart, that these guys were like brothers to me? Did I tell you how they took me in, got me a job, gave me a place to live and a place to paint, and offered me a place in their family, IF I chose it? When I asked Jim one day what he wanted from me in return he shrugged, said, "Get some painting done." Did I mention any of that? I guess I didn't.

I knew that each of them would lie to his own grandmother, or steal from her purse, in order to score a little dope. And I knew that they had lied to me and used me, when it became, to their minds, necessary...in order to score a little dope. I knew that. And they knew I knew. There was an acceptable balance there.

"I don't have any idea what you are talking about," I said.

"Never mind then," said Jim, "you don't need to know."

"But..."

"If you don't plan on becoming a big time dealer, then you don't need to know. Man, I can not believe we're going to see *the Stones!*"

When Jim got up to go inside yet again I asked Henry what a breaker was. Henry laughed and explained that he was a guy who got paid *good money* to position himself between a big time dealer and the small time dealers so that if things went wrong the buck would stop on his doorstep. "Wow," I said. "If things go bad he goes to prison?"

"Yeah," said Henry and laughed. "The guy's a jerk."

"But, he makes good money?"

"He gets a cut."

"So, he makes *really* good money."

"Yeah, but he takes the fall along with all us two bit junkies if it comes down."

"Wow," I said.

"And when we get out of jail, he'll be on his way to Federal prison."

"Wow."

"Yeah," said Henry, "The guy is a moron." I think that may have been the first thing said on those steps that day which was completely true.

So, that's how I ended up being the ONLY person NOT ON DRUGS in an entire sold-out 60,000 seat arena as the Rolling Stones took the stage. Man, it was a frightening experience... But they were good seats. Mick Jagger was about 6 inches tall, you could almost make out the expressions on his rubbery, wrinkly face—and it was free, thanks to the schneedle.

## **LIFE BEGINS TO WORK ITSELF OUT**

So, pretty quickly now. Just to wrap things up: I found myself first hanging out near the restaurant where a junkie I knew was manager and he made a point of seeing that I was fed. And when I needed a place to stay but had no money, he took me in. They fitted out the garage so that I could paint and sleep out there and when the opportunity came up they hired me at the restaurant as a dishwasher. I got involved with a junkie's girlfriend who took off a week or two from their ages-old, on again off again relationship and moved into the garage with me for a few awkward days.

Emily told me she would *kick* and tried. I walked into the main house one day and saw her on the living room floor alternately writhing and curling up in a ball, alternately sweating and shaking with body wracking chills. She was white as a ghost and when she looked at me with hollow eyes she didn't recognize me. I didn't recognize her either. I felt terrible. When I went to him agitated and concerned, Henry said, "Leave her alone. She'll be alright. She always goes through this when she tries to kick."

A day or two later she asked me to take her downtown to a methadone clinic, and I was glad, even proud, to do so. It meant she was taking this idea of kicking seriously. When she went inside the clinic, I waited outside on the sidewalk, among junkies and whores, the only sober guy for miles. After a long time, she came out and went directly up to a tall black man in a full-length black and white leather coat, and kissed him full on the lips. They then shook hands like lovers parting and—while he sipped from a paper cup—she came to me and said, "Let's go."

We walked in silence back to the car. I was furious. After we got in, before I started the engine, I asked her bitterly, "So, who was that black guy?"

"Which one?"

"That tall black guy you kissed?"

"Can you do me one more favor?"

We sat in the car for a bit at loggerheads. "Tell me who that guy was and I'll do you the favor."

"OK," she said. "The truth is, I don't know who that guy is. I've seen him at the clinic before but I don't know his name."

"You walked up to a black guy who you don't even know his name and kissed him on the lips?"

She unfolded her hand to reveal a crumpled wad of moist bills.

"What is that?"

"That's what he gave me for the methadone."

"What methadone?"

She looked at me for a long time thinking, I suppose, that I could work this puzzle out for myself, but I couldn't. She explained, even though it pained her to have to. "I go in; I get my dose; I come out; I spit it in the mouth of someone who distributes; he pays cash. It's a good deal all around." "Now I want you to fulfill your promise," she said cheerily. "I thought they ask you to open your mouth after you get your dose."

She smiled as if she possessed some secret elfish wisdom.

"Now," she said, "it's time for you to fulfill your promise."

So, things are happening pretty quickly now and as we drive out to the farm near the James River, I'm telling her

that I will NEVER EVER EVER again either give her money or drive her anywhere, even to the methadone clinic, especially to the methadone clinic, or ANYWHERE that has anything at all to do with heroin. She accepts that with alacrity.

At the farm, as I pull in, the seemingly empty old house becomes animated, there are faces looking out of the upstairs windows and two guys with handguns in their belts come out casually and lean on the wooden rail that leads up to the front door. She tells me to park about 50 yards away from the house and wait in the car.

These guys on the steps are looking directly at me and each of them has his hand resting solidly on the butt of his weapon, as she hops out of the car and skips like a child toward the house. As she bounds joyfully up the steps she nods to them and they respond NOT AT ALL—they are staying focused on me. One of these guys moves along the porch to a position where he can, I'm thinking, get a view of my license plate number. I'm trying to look anywhere but at these two guys. (You should try THAT some time.)

She goes into the house and comes out several minutes later with treasure clutched in her tiny hands. She gets into the car beside me and joyfully shows me what she has. It just looks like two pills to me.

"Where to?" I ask coldly.

"Right here," she says and out of her purse come the necessary items. I have my head turned decidedly away from her as she does whatever it is she does. Not that it was anything I hadn't seen before; it was just something I didn't

care to see again. I had had enough. Somehow I just hadn't realized it until that moment. I couldn't shake the image now of her kissing the tall black guy and, now I realize that he was not sipping FROM the cup, but spitting INTO it.

While I sat there, I was thinking about the times I gave her \$20 and watched her walk away. I was thinking about the time I drove her to a certain corner in a part of town I had never been in before, and didn't feel comfortable being in then, and, upon her frantic insistence that I leave her there. I was thinking about the time I drove her to the hospital to be tested for I forget what and her asking the nurse if she could draw her own blood. I remember the look on the nurse's face; first the shock, then the repulsion, before she turned white and wobbled at the thought. I caught that nurse as she clutched at something to hold herself upright. Meanwhile her patient took the tourniquet from the tray and almost joyfully strapped it on. I was able to catch that nurse but, though I was willing to catch Emily too, she wasn't interested in my help.

This was a struggle for me because, I remembered one evening, around Thanksgiving, when Emily arrived in the house looking extraordinarily pregnant and proudly produced a turkey and all the fixings from under her coat, including two cans of cranberry sauce. I could not believe that. Henry sent her back to the store to steal a couple bottles of wine for the event. I couldn't believe that either, but, it was all good fun. She came back with two bottles of Blue Nun. Meanwhile Margaret cooked the bird and I sat around amazed at the way these outlaws lived their lives.



And, of course, I remembered her lying in my arms out there in the garage, as we looked up at the Richmond starlit night, through the skylight in the garage roof. I held her in my arms out there and she slept like a baby.

When the university from which I'd graduated discovered I was working for them as a part-time janitor and thought it might be better to let me go than to let me continue (that's how much they thought of their own degree), these people, these junkies, these low-lives, took me in like a stray dog. They made sure that I was fed and gave me a place to stay. Most importantly, these good people—outlaws who lived their lives beyond the protection of the law—told me they wanted to be sure I had a place where I could continue to paint. Once in a while, such was their support, I'd return to discover (stolen?) tubes of paint where, when I left, there had only been crumpled, empty tubes. The other side of that, the undeniable other aspect of it, is that any one of these good people would look Christ himself straight in the eye and, without blinking, lie to him in order to score a hit of heroin.

When next I looked, Emily had kindly replaced things into her purse and she had her head back on the seat of the car, her eyes were barely open and she was smiling. "This is the very last time," I said coldly as I started the engine. "It's the very last goddamned time." She said nothing. Her head lolled as I drove away from that dreadful farmhouse.

So, then, as I recall, word came down within the community that there was about to be a big bust and that it

was going to be a heroin bust and distribution had been halted for a bit and good luck to those who needed dope of any sort and did not already have it...which was everybody who used, because you didn't put heroin aside for a rainy day, you got it and you used it. Expiration date: NOW, this very goddamned minute. The stuff just doesn't seem to keep.

There I am, Mister Innocent, having never shot drugs in my life, mister painter-part-time dishwasher guy, out in the garage slapping paint on canvas. To my mind, as I recall I was doing some pretty nice work at that time; for the first time in my life I was working large, because, for the first time in my life, I had the space for it. I had stretched a couple of beautiful 6 X 6 canvasses and had some drawings pinned up on the garage wall. It was going nicely. I had plans. I had nothing but time. My mind was reeling day and night with the wonderful possibilities ahead.

That garage was situated on an alley. The main house, in which my acquaintances lived, and to which Emily had returned after I put an end to helping her score her drugs, was situated on a pleasant little tree-lined street. The garage had two windows facing that alley and as I worked I would look up when I heard anything going on out there. Those windows were my TV. So it was that I looked up one day and saw a cop's car drive slowly by the first window, then slowly through the next. I saw the profile of the cop in the passenger seat as they rolled by. Ten minutes later I saw the same profile of the same guy as they drifted by again. By the time they drifted by my window the third time I was out

the door and up the back steps, into to the main house, and frantically telling them inside what I had seen.

They knew.

Henry said matter-of-factly, "We may be next."

"Well what are you going to do?" I asked.

"What do you want us to do?" someone said.

"I don't know...get out, go away. Flee." I said in near hysteria.

They laughed at that. One of them said, "Pah, it's easier to get heroin in prison than it is to get it out here."

"What?"

"It's also better stuff," someone else said.

"What?" I said trying to remain calm, trying to make sense of how relaxed they were.

I recalled once when they discussed different ways to make needles out of cigarette wrappers, even though there is—according to these same people—no lack whatsoever of good needles in the joint. It was just a casual little evening discussion among friends.

Their extreme calm had me almost insane. I dashed out onto the front step and took a seat and watched with Jim and Margaret as a cop car rolled slowly down the avenue through the dappled light under the lovely overhanging Richmond summer trees.

Now, Henry comes out and sits down quietly beside me. As they go by he asks, "Are those the ones?" I lift my head up and find myself looking directly into the eyes of the cop on the passenger side. It's him. I wonder if he can discern the difference between Henry and me.

“Yes,” I say. They’re just going around the block and around the block and around the block,” I say.

Henry snorts knowingly. He gets up and goes to the front door, leans in and says something. Before long the entire family is out there on the steps. Someone is saying, “I think it’s going down soon.” They sit and watch as that same car goes by yet again and the cop on the passenger side looks casually in our direction. He’s got all the time in the world.

On the steps, I’m the only one trembling in fear; for my friends this is a grotesque kind of entertainment. Someone cocks a finger and aims it at the cop car as they round the corner. “Jesus...” I whisper, “Don’t do that.” And this proves to be the most hilarious thing anyone has ever said. I run through the house and go down the back steps and into the garage. I draw the old threadbare curtains that are hanging there. When I hear the tires on the cobblestone outside, I peek through and see the cop car go slowly by. I look at the working drawings I have hanging up on the wall. Goddamn it. I look at the beautifully stretched, just-primed, nice-sized canvasses that are begging for paint. I’m practically weeping. I look at my set up—the garage, the part-time job with money coming in, the friends, junkies though some may be. I look at my brushes, my paint, the stupid saggy mattress on the floor. Now I am in tears. I hear the crunching of the tires as the cop car rolls slowly by again outside. God damn it.

I don’t remember how I got to the airport.

. . .

## CONCLUSION

When I was a low-life, above all, I had friends. Some of them were social outcasts, some not; they were all good people though. Why they chose to accept me, I don't know. In those days I was an innocent, and an idiot, I was timid and full of fear: I was slightly out of control...and aimlessly adrift.

It's kind of funny the way life works itself out though. Because, now that I'm a respectable guy, you know, married, clean shaven, decent job that requires a tie, payin' my taxes—in short a civilized, normalized, contributing member of society—that's the most despicable thing a man can be. Now that I'm a respectable guy, respectable guys are, apparently, the source of everybody else's problems. The poor, the crazy, the lazy, the moronic, the perverted, the lame, the criminals, the politicians (if such a fine line can be drawn), are all of one belief: without us—the respectable guys—they'd all be better off.

That's cool. My education prepared me for this.

Besides, they may all be right.

I mean, I'd be the last to argue.

